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Negotiation and Instrumentalisation
– The Reception of “the Tragic” in Modern Chinese
Literary Discourse, 1917-1949

by

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DECLARATION

This is to certify that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed:

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the concept of tragedy has been introduced and has negotiated itself into modern Chinese literary discourse during a time period of thirty-two years from 1917 to 1949. Taking into consideration the simultaneous development of a modern Chinese literary tradition, this study concentrates on the relationship between the discourse on one particular genre and the discourse on literature as a whole during the process of reception of an alien literary concept and its influence on indigenous literature.

Modern Chinese intellectuals interpret the concept of tragedy from two main aspects: one is in the theatrical domain where tragedy functions as a dramatic form closely related to the emergence of a new genre in Chinese literature, namely, the spoken drama (*huaju*); the other is in the aesthetic domain where tragedy (or more specifically, *the tragic*) operates as a literary or philosophical idea and offers possibilities for the development of this notion in non-dramatic literature. This dual-focus approach is fundamental in the formation of a modern Chinese discourse on tragedy, as a paralleled line of arguments concerning these two aspects remains visible in the modern period.

The major influence from foreign intellectual tradition on modern Chinese perception of tragedy takes the shape of two pairs of different perspectives, namely, literary utilitarianism and literary aestheticism in theoretical discussions, corresponding to realism and romanticism in literary creativity. These two pairs of perspectives set the tone for modern Chinese understanding of the concept of tragedy: literary utilitarianism and literary aestheticism focus respectively on the foremost importance of tragedy's practical utility in social progression, or of tragedy's aesthetic function to offer emotional cleansing to the audience; realism and romanticism debate the intricate relation between tragedy and social reality that besieged several generations of writers throughout the Republican era. It is

noticeable that these viewpoints have not developed in a balanced way, as a pragmatic realist perspective has prevailed in both theory and practice, while the aesthetic/romantic pursuit being either rejected or incorporated into the ultimate thematic concern with social reformation and national salvation.

This study abstracts the idea of the tragic from its dramatic form in examining the cross-genre and multidisciplinary development of the concept of tragedy in modern Chinese literary tradition. The main body of the thesis contains four chapters. The first chapter sets the scope of this study by clarifying several terminologies that are key to approach the long-lasting debates on whether there is a Chinese tragedy in 20th-century Chinese literary discourse. The second chapter focuses on the period of the New Culture Movement from 1917 to 1927, when the counter-traditional and iconoclastic agenda dominates the overall literary field and associates tragedy largely with literature's functional role in social criticism. The third chapter examines theories and writings produced from 1928 to 1937, when the perspective of pragmatic realism prevails the reading of *the tragic* due to the strengthened connection between literature and politics. The fourth chapter centres on the wartime literary expression of *the tragic* from 1937 to 1949, when the Anti-Japanese War homogenises the literary subjects with an overt and unified political theme to inspire the people with optimism and fighting spirit. By exploring the possible factors that differentiate modern Chinese tragic perception from its foreign counterparts, this study investigates and demonstrates the constant interplay among several cultural, social, and political factors in affecting the formation of a modern critical discourse on tragedy.

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INTRODUCTION

Gao Xudong, a Chinese scholar in comparative literature, refers to the Western influence on modern and contemporary Chinese literature as “all-pervasive”.¹ “The textbooks of literature we are now using, including those of ancient Chinese literature, are compiled under the rules of Western literary theories and concepts; contemporary Chinese writers, whether consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, are still receiving continuous influences from Western literature.”² This phenomenon originates from the beginning of modern Chinese literature in the early 20th century, when a pronounced influx of foreign theories and ideas began to satisfy the appetite of a new generation of Chinese intellectuals, helping to redefine their literary tradition in a wider context of world literature. Among the first of several terms that have promptly attracted scholarly attention, “tragedy” (*beiju*) – both as a literary genre and an aesthetic idea entirely alien to the Chinese – constitutes a significant part of the modern Chinese construction of a new literary tradition. Consequently, the examination of how the concept of tragedy has been introduced and has negotiated itself into modern Chinese literary discourse demonstrates certain common features of the development of Chinese literature in the first half of the 20th century.

It has already been well-established that modern Chinese literature takes its shape from a pressing cultural and social crisis besetting the Chinese at the turn of the 20th century; or, to quote Marston Anderson, that “modern Chinese literature developed

¹ The English translations of those Chinese texts being discussed in this study, unless stated otherwise, are based on my own research efforts. Where accessible and standard translations are available from the existing published works, quotations are made with clearly identified references in the notes; where such translations are not, I provide my own. The titles of books, newspapers, and magazines mentioned in the discussions are presented first in their original Chinese forms and then followed by the English translations in a paraphrasing rather than a word-for-word style.

² Gao Xudong, *Bijiao wenxue yu ershi shiji Zhongguo wenxue* (Comparative literature and the 20th-century Chinese literature) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2002), 3.

from a series of setbacks”³ brought about by several military and diplomatic defeats because of China’s deepening engagement with the rest of the world. The political imperative has produced a sense of crisis among modern Chinese intellectuals: the superior and overwhelming Western forces urge them to reflect upon the backwardness of Chinese culture and social institutions; as a result, they come up with a solution to follow and imitate the Western models, believing that only in this way could they redeem China from a disastrous downfall. Literature has since then stayed at the forefront of the campaign for an overall cultural and social revolution, and shouldered the compelling obligation to eradicate the “chronic disease” produced by old traditions that lasted for more than two thousand years, in order to “establish for Chinese politics a foundation for reformation at the artistic and literary level”.⁴ Therefore, to modern Chinese literature at birth, it is of primary importance to mirror the social reality to the greatest extent so that people can identify themselves in it: “[engaging with] literature and art in the past were like watching a fire from the other side of the river, but now it calls for us to burn ourselves in the fire; we should deeply feel the need to get involved in social affairs!”⁵ This literary orientation attempts to shorten the distance between literature and reality, so that the former functions more as an ideological weapon to enlighten the people.

It is in this national crisis that the concept of tragedy comes into the view of modern Chinese intellectuals; consequently, the Chinese interpretation of this concept has first of all taken the prevailing socio-cultural concerns into consideration. A popular view among intellectuals at this time regards tragedy as the ideal form to negate and criticise the existing literary tradition. This opinion is produced by their

³ Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (London: University of California Press, 1990), 2.

⁴ Hu Shi, “Wo de qilu” (My crossroad), first published in *Nuli zhoubao* (Endeavor weekly) 7, June 18, 1922, reprinted in Zhu Zheng, ed., *Hu Shi wenji, di yi juan* (Essay collection of Hu Shi, vol. 1) (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 2013), 310.

⁵ Lu Xun, “Wenji yu zhengzhi de qitu” (The crossroad of literature, art, and politics), first published in *Xinwen bao, xuehai* (Xinwen newspaper, Sea of learning) 182-183, January 28-29, 1927, reprinted in *Lu Xun quanji, di qi juan* (Complete works of Lu Xun, vol. 7) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 120.

belief in the functional role of literature during the process of social enlightenment: critics associate the lack of a tragic awareness in traditional Chinese literature with the backwardness not only at the literary level but more importantly at the cultural level; writers, at the same time, begin to practise with various forms of tragic narratives, affirming that this new literary mode “reflects the contemporary situation better”⁶ than the traditional ones. Modern Chinese intellectuals interpret the concept of tragedy from two main aspects: one is in the theatrical domain where tragedy functions as a dramatic form closely related to the emergence of a new genre in Chinese literature, namely, the spoken drama (*huaju*); the other is in the aesthetic domain where tragedy (or more specifically, *the tragic*) operates as a literary or philosophical idea and offers possibilities for a cross-genre development of this notion in non-dramatic literature. This dual-focus approach is fundamental in the formation of a modern Chinese tragic perception, as a paralleled line of arguments concerning these two aspects remains visible in the development of the discourse on tragedy throughout the Republican period. Both aspects have attached great importance to tragedy’s direct appeal to the audience’s emotions and thoughts – a reason why this foreign concept has gained an instant popularity in modern China.

The relationship between literature and politics is a complicated yet lingering problem besetting the scholarly debates on tragedy in Republican China. Modern intellectuals distinguish themselves with different understandings of the inextricable link between these two; “the function of literature in the social process, and the way in which it best fulfils this function”,⁷ thus becomes a common question for those who attempt to either assess or reinterpret a given literary phenomenon at a certain period of time. In this study, the utilitarian perspective of modern Chinese intellectuals makes it impossible to totally strip off the Chinese tragic perception

⁶ Shiao-Ling Yu, *Chinese Drama after the Cultural Revolution, 1979-1989: An Anthology* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 2.

⁷ Bernd Eberstein, ed., *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature 1900-1949, vol. 4, The Drama* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1989), 7.

from the obvious pragmatic implications. Rather, later scholars regard modern Chinese literature as a whole to be “very much intertwined with politics”⁸ and for this reason “the product of an infinite array of socio-political forces and cultural factors”,⁹ which is equally suitable for describing the development of a tragic literary tradition. Since it is necessary for any foreign concept to coincide with the indigenous literary practice in order to be fully accepted, the political and pragmatic function is then the exact point of entry where the concept of tragedy negotiates itself into the context of modern Chinese literature. Scholarly concerns of “[d]ifferent artistic or ideological agendas, as well as changing political circumstances”¹⁰ that shape the discourse on tragedy continue to be the central issues both in theoretical discussions and in literary creativity; therefore, the Chinese notion of tragedy is not a mere imitation of its foreign counterparts, but a unique literary appropriation and reflection of the Chinese experience of social and political transformation in the modern period.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS

Since the modern Chinese introduction of the concept of tragedy is in parallel with the efforts to establish a new literary tradition, this study aims to investigate whether the discourse on tragedy has followed the same pattern with the discourse on literature as a whole during this constructive process. In other words, to what extent has the discourse on tragedy corresponded to or differed from the overall literary discourse in different phases of modern Chinese literature is the key question this study is asking. This objective can be further explained by three sub-questions:

First, how has the concept of tragedy been interpreted in modern Chinese literary

⁸ Kirk A. Denton, “Historical Review,” in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, ed. Joshua S. Mostow (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 287.

⁹ Victor H. Mair, *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), xiii.

¹⁰ Zhang Yingjin, “Modern Chinese Literature as an Institution: Canon and Literary History,” in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, ed. Joshua S. Mostow (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 324.

thoughts and theories; what kind of debates does it bring about; and how are those scholarly discussions related to the mainstream literary agenda, as well as to the prevailing socio-political concerns? This question deals with the development of the theoretical discourse on tragedy, and examines in particular the Chinese interpretations of some specific foreign concepts and terms regarding the definition of tragedy. In general, the theoretical construction under observation is initially based on a complete rejection of the existence of a Chinese tragedy: the New Culture intellectuals fiercely attack the ending pattern of the happy reunion, namely, the *Datanyuan jieju*, in traditional Chinese literature, and label it as anti-tragic due to its neglect of the miserable social reality. This attitude has been largely inherited in the following decades, and has gradually shifted the focus of arguments to the cultural and ideological differences between China and the West. Along with the negation of the existing traditions is the direct reference and translation of foreign theories of tragedy, which is further adapted to the strengthening connection between literature and politics in the later Republican period. Meanwhile, the pragmatic and aesthetic perspectives have coexisted in the theoretical discussions, whilst the functional viewpoint is remarkable and thus in line with the dominance of pragmatic realism at this time.

Second, how is *the tragic* related to the pragmatic and aesthetic approaches in modern Chinese literary creativity and criticism; are there different understandings between writers and critics towards the idea of the tragic expressed through the same literary works, and what are the major factors determining their perceptions? This question concentrates on the acceptance of *the tragic* and its impact on modern Chinese literary practice – both dramatic and non-dramatic works. It also focuses upon the reception of some tragic works among critics in the Republican era, which is another important factor shaping the popular understanding of *the tragic* at the time. In accordance with the coexistence of pragmatism and aestheticism in theoretical discussions, the literary realist concern of *the tragic* in practice and

criticism parallels the romantic expressions relating to personal literary orientations of the writers and critics. On the other hand, the dominance of realism in theory produces a similar trend in practice, as the predominant reviews in modern period associate *the tragic* in the first place with the faithful presentation of people's lives, regarding it as a necessary reflection of social reality. The perspective of realism remains overwhelming as the relationship between literature and politics has been gradually enhanced in the following decades, to such an extent that the romantic features are sometimes rejected by critics for the sake of emphasising the realist implications of the works. Therefore, whether and how certain political concerns have impacted on the critical assessments of *the tragic* in some particular literary works will be examined in detail.

Third, how has the conceptualisation of tragedy been applied in the creation of a tragic literature; do tragic works reflect contemporary theoretical trends, or does the formation of a tragic narrative produce certain specific and new characteristics independent from the theory? This question connects theoretical discussions with literary creativity, and explores factors that have either promoted or prevented the application of theory into practice. These factors have something to do with the issue of applicability or appropriateness when a foreign concept negotiates into the indigenous literature; the differences between foreign terms in theory and their Chinese adaptations in practice are illustrative of this process. Meanwhile, the social context that has nourished such an indigenous tradition also comes into play; in this sense, the intimate engagement of tragedy with the political discourse both in theory and practice indicates the significance of the external impacts on the construction of a specific narrative tradition. In addition, the writers' individual preferences which are closely related to their life experiences at certain times or to their personal interests in some particular foreign inspirations are also essential to the formation of their distinctive styles of tragic narratives. These subjective elements will also be examined accordingly in this study, as they have somewhat determined the literary

orientations of realism or romanticism of the writers where theories have failed to play an effective part in guiding their literary practice.

In brief, while addressing the above three key problems, this study examines how the concept of tragedy has been introduced, interpreted, and instrumentalised in the context of modern Chinese literary criticism and creativity within a time period of thirty-two years from 1917-1949. It deals with several “relationships” in its argumentation, which can be summarised from four aspects: the first is the relationship between tragedy as a particular genre and literature in the whole; the second the relationship between theory and practice; the third the relationship between the perspectives of pragmatism and aestheticism in intellectual discussions; and the fourth the relationship between the literary trends of realism and romanticism in literary creativity. The investigation and demonstration of these four “relationships” constitute the core arguments of this study; the cultural and political implications hidden behind those different intellectual discourse are also discussed accordingly.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The modern Chinese introduction of the concept of tragedy has received much scholarly attention, because it is largely consistent with the establishment of a modern literary tradition. Later scholars sometimes regard this topic as a case study to exemplify or summarise certain general features of modern Chinese literature as a whole. Current Chinese academia sees abundant research findings on the Chinese reception of the term “tragedy” both as a literary genre and an aesthetic idea, which continue across decades and academic disciplines. In contrast, the Euro-American scholarship is comparatively less concerned with the systematic and in-depth analysis of the Chinese perception of tragedy. Research on either the development of this notion in modern Chinese literary theories or the formation of a tragic literary tradition in practice remains somewhat limited and incomplete.

In view of the above mentioned research questions, this study first looks into the

standard literary companions and histories, to see how existing scholarship deals with the formation of a modern Chinese intellectual discourse on tragedy. Such material can be roughly divided into three groups: The first group discusses this topic in a chronological way, such as Leo Ou-fan Lee's studies in *The Cambridge History of China*,¹¹ and the two successive chapters by David Der-wei Wang and Michelle Yeh in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*.¹² This kind of research is a general review of the literary trends in Republican China, with overall introductions of the respective interpretations of the concept of tragedy in different phases of modern Chinese literature.

The second group deals with those materials thematically. Examples are Zhu Defa's *Zhongguo Wusi wenxue shi* (History of the May Fourth Chinese literature),¹³ and Victor Mair's *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*.¹⁴ This kind of research demonstrates the features of modern Chinese literature through examining the development of four genres, namely, fiction (*xiaoshuo*), drama (*xiju*), poetry (*shige*), and prose (*sanwen*). Tragedy is commonly placed under the category of drama due to its origin as a theatrical form; consequently, research of this kind concentrates mainly on tragic plays written in Republican China.

The third group integrates the above mentioned two methods; it examines the development of different genres in different phases of modern Chinese literature. *The*

¹¹ Leo Ou-fan Lee, "Literary Trends I: The Quest for Modernity, 1895-1927," in *The Cambridge History of China vol. 12: Republican China, 1912-1949, Part 1*. ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 451-504; Leo Ou-fan Lee, "Literary Trends: the Road to Revolution 1927-1949," in *The Cambridge History of China vol. 13: Republican China, 1912-1949, Part 2*. eds. John K. Fairbank, and Albert Feuerwerker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 421-491.

¹² David Der-wei Wang, "Chinese Literature from 1841 to 1937," in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature, vol. 2*, eds. Kang-i Sun Chang, and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 413-564; Michelle Yeh, "Chinese Literature from 1937 to the present," in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature, vol. 2*, eds. Kang-i Sun Chang, and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 565-705.

¹³ Zhu Defa, *Zhongguo Wusi wenxue shi* (History of the May Fourth Chinese literature) (Jinan: Shandong wenyi chubanshe, 1986).

¹⁴ Victor H. Mair, *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

Literature of China in the Twentieth Century by Bonnie McDougall and Kam Louie,¹⁵ *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshi nian* (Three decades in modern Chinese literature) by Qian Liqun, Wen Rumin, and Wu Fuhui,¹⁶ and *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shi, 1917-2000* (History of modern Chinese literature, 1917-2000) by Zhu Donglin,¹⁷ all follow this pattern. In this approach, the particular development of a genre is checked and demonstrated chronologically, so that the evolution of a modern Chinese tragic tradition is more consistently presented.

Generally speaking, the standard literary companions and histories provide a basic understanding of the emergence and development of a Chinese tragic perception, which is placed in a wider context of modern literature on the whole. Their approaches, especially the third one, are useful in allowing this study to adopt a similar structure to investigate the relationship between tragedy as a particular genre and modern Chinese literature as a whole during their simultaneous process of development. However, as introductory works, they obviously lack enough detailed and in-depth analysis concerning the specific features of modern Chinese tragic perception. Also, these research do not usually make separate examinations of the dramatic and non-dramatic meanings of tragedy; while they chiefly refer to “tragedy” in its theatrical form, few of them trace the developing interpretation of “the tragic” as an aesthetic idea in modern Chinese literary context. These are the aspects that this study will address with particular emphasis.

The specific studies on modern Chinese reception of the concept of tragedy in current scholarly discussions are in the main dealing with issues from three aspects: the first is the reflections on the question whether China has produced indigenous tragedies; the second is the review of the introduction of the term “tragedy” into the

¹⁵ Bonnie S. McDougall, and Kam Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century* (London: Hurst & Company, 1997).

¹⁶ Qian Liqun, Wen Rumin, and Wu Fuhui, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshi nian* (Three decades in modern Chinese literature) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998).

¹⁷ Zhu Donglin, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shi, 1917-2000* (History of modern Chinese literature, 1917-2000) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2007).

modern Chinese literary context; the third is the analysis of the uniqueness of modern Chinese tragic perception. These aspects are of particular relevance for this study in that the first one is the starting point for this study to engage in the existing scholarship, and to further discuss some related matters concerning the possible factors that have produced the long-lasting debate about the genuineness of Chinese tragedy; the second one is the major concern of this study, and will be examined both in theory and in practice according to different phases of modern Chinese literature; the third one is the final purpose of this study, as it summarises the basic features of modern Chinese tragic tradition in the light of its divergences from its foreign counterparts, which are produced by the particular social and political context of Republican China.

The intellectual debate over whether there is a Chinese tragedy has emerged almost simultaneously with the first appearance of the term “tragedy” in modern Chinese literary discourse. Scholars used to focus on the negation or reassessment of the *Datanyuan* (happy reunion)¹⁸ ending pattern, making it as more or less a sole criterion for defining Chinese tragedy. Yet, in recent years, some scholars notice a misuse of different meanings of the term “tragedy” in Chinese literary criticism, and regard it as a causal factor that has produced certain contested features of Chinese tragedy. In this respect, Yun-tong Luk’s “The Concept of Tragedy as Genre and Its Applicability to Classical Chinese Drama”,¹⁹ Wang Deyan’s “Zhongguo beiju wenti

¹⁸ *Datanyuan*, or *Datanyuan jieju*, is an ending pattern in literature or film marked by the happy reunion of the characters despite the hardships they have earlier gone through. It is in particular popular among traditional Chinese literary works, folk tales, and operas; such stories as *Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* (The butterfly lovers), *Kongque dongnan fei* (Peacock flies to the southeast), *Mudan ting* (Peony pavilion), and *Changsheng dian* (Palace of eternal life) are examples of this pattern.

¹⁹ Yun-tong Luk, “The Concept of Tragedy as Genre and Its Applicability to Classical Chinese Drama,” in *The Chinese Text – Studies in Comparative Literature*, ed. Ying-hsiung Chou (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1986), 15-28.

de qitu yu xiwang” (Perplexity and prospect of the problem of Chinese tragedy),²⁰ Chen Jun’s “Zhongguo wu beiju mingti bainian huigu yu fansi” (The review and reflection on “China has no tragedy” over the past one hundred years),²¹ and Chen Qijia’s “Beiju de mingming ji qi houguo” (The naming of tragedy and its aftermath),²² provide detailed discussions about this matter.

Luk suggests the establishment of a distinctive conception of genre in order to clarify among several terminological problems concerning the study of tragedy in current Chinese academia. He considers it a feasible approach to abstract a tragic idea from Chinese philosophy and religion, and to accordingly define the Chinese tragedy in the context of Chinese literary thoughts and writings. Wang interprets the Chinese tragic perception from two aspects: the intrinsic nature that defines a tragedy (what he calls *beiju xing*), and the emotional experience tragedy offers to the audience (what he calls *beiju gan*). He observes in current Chinese academia a conceptual confusion between these two aspects, and traces this intellectual tradition back to the beginning of the 20th century when scholars reassessed Chinese literature in the light of foreign principles. Chen Dun considers “China has no tragedy” a somewhat fake proposition, in that it has been influenced to a large extent by strong senses of social utilitarianism and non-academic concerns especially in the early modern period of Chinese literature; as a result, the question becomes not a single literary or aesthetic issue but a political agenda of great complexity. To him, it is necessary to be aware of the multiple motives operating behind this question, in order to separate the intellectual discourse into different aspects. Chen Qijia reflects upon the terminological problem from the perspective of word choice and translation.

²⁰ Wang Deyan, “Zhongguo beiju wenti de qitu yu xiwang” (Perplexity and prospect of the problem of Chinese tragedy), *Beifang gongye daxue xuebao* (Journal of North China University of Technology) 13, no. 4 (2001): 62-70, doi:10.3969/j.issn.1001-5477.2001.04.012.

²¹ Chen Jun, “Zhongguo wu beiju mingti bainian huigu yu fansi” (The review and reflection on “China has no tragedy” over the past one hundred years), *Zhonghua xiqu* (Chinese opera) 43 (2011): 22-53.

²² Chen Qijia, “Beiju de mingming ji qi houguo – luelun Zhongguo xiandai beiju guannian de qiyuan” (The naming of tragedy and its aftermath – A brief discussion of the origin of modern Chinese concept of tragedy), *Jianghai xuekan* (Jianghai academic journal) 6 (2012): 182-188, doi:10.3969/j.issn.1000-856X.2012.06.033.

He questions the necessity of endowing the single term “tragedy” with an all-inclusive package of meanings, and suggests the development of a set of terminology in current Chinese academia according to the different aspects of the scholarly concern.

On the whole, the discussion in recent Chinese academia of the question “whether there is a Chinese tragedy?” highlights the changing perception of tragedy in contemporary Chinese literary discourse. The reflection of the terminological confusion points out the potential risk brought about by the hasty acceptance of a foreign concept, thus adding to the variety and complexity of the discourse on tragedy in Chinese literary criticism. To this study, research of this group is instructive in that it, on the one hand, addresses certain pressing problems in the study of tragedy in current Chinese academia, and, on the other hand, reveals the social and political factors that have influenced the formation of a modern Chinese tragic tradition. However, the existing research lacks detailed examination of scholarly debate over the existence of the Chinese tragedy in the Republican period, which, according to this study, is nevertheless necessary in order to approach the terminological confusion in current Chinese academia. Therefore, this study will not engage in the current scholarship to argue for or against a Chinese tragedy; instead, it traces this contested matter to its origins at the beginning of the 20th century, and concentrates on how the concept of tragedy has been interpreted under the interplay among a series of literary, cultural, and socio-political factors unique to modern China.

The existing scholarship on the introduction of the concept of tragedy into modern Chinese literature generally focuses on two aspects: the particular foreign literary trends and theories that have influenced the formation of a Chinese tragic tradition, and the Chinese literary responses to this impact. Some scholars demonstrate this process from a macroscopic view, such as *The Introduction of*

Western Literary Theories into Modern China: 1919-1925 by Bonnie McDougall,²³ “The Impact of Japanese Literary Trends on Modern Chinese Writers” by Ching-mao Cheng,²⁴ *Zhongguo xiandai bijiao xiju shi* (Comparative history of modern Chinese theatre) by Tian Benxiang,²⁵ and *Zhongguo xiandai xiju sichao shi* (History of the trend of thought of modern Chinese drama) by Song Baozhen.²⁶

McDougall explores elements from the cultural mentality and social politics which have manipulated the Chinese introduction of foreign theories in the first decade (1919-1925) of modern Chinese literature, when the promotion of drama offered tragedy a direct encounter with the prevailing socio-cultural matters. Cheng traces the significant Japanese impact on the Chinese reception of foreign terms. He points out the shared objective of modern China and Japan in their introductions and imitations of foreign intellectual traditions, and at the same time highlights the utilitarian perspective in Chinese literary activities. Both McDougall and Cheng take into consideration the social and political factors; they examine the changing perceptions of tragedy in the context of the overall literary trends. Research of Tian and Song, on the other hand, focuses on specific foreign influences that have shaped the development of modern Chinese theatre. Tian demonstrates the variety of sources in terms of some particular writers such as Henrik Ibsen, Oscar Wilde, Eugene O'Neill, Chekhov, and Gogol; Song concentrates on three major foreign literary trends, namely, Romanticism, Realism, and Modernism, which have impacted the creativity and criticism of modern Chinese drama. Both of them offer rough examinations of the development of a tragic notion in theory and practice, with references to its engagement in the national drama movement of the 1920s, the

²³ Bonnie S. McDougall, *The Introduction of Western Literary Theories into Modern China: 1919-1925* (Tokyo: The Center for East Asian Cultural Studies, 1971).

²⁴ Ching-mao Cheng, “The Impact of Japanese Literary Trends on Modern Chinese Writers,” in *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*, ed. Merle Goldman (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977), 63-88.

²⁵ Tian Benxiang, ed., *Zhongguo xiandai bijiao xijushi* (Comparative history of modern Chinese theatre) (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1993).

²⁶ Sun Qingsheng, *Zhongguo xiandai xiju sichao shi* (History of the trend of thought of modern Chinese drama) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1994).

left-wing drama movement of the 1930s, and drama of the war of resistance of the 1940s.

Apart from the general reviews, there are also specific studies of the negotiation of the concept of tragedy into modern Chinese literary context. Examples are “Jindai yilai Zhongguo ren dui Zhongguo beiju de renshi” (The Chinese knowledge about Chinese tragedy since the modern period) by Xiong Yuanyi and Liu Wenji,²⁷ “Ershi shiji Zhongguo beiju lilun de lishi zouxiang” (The historical direction of the theory of tragedy in 20th-century China) by Shi Xiaoli,²⁸ and *Zhongguo beiju meixue shi* (History of the aesthetics of Chinese tragedy) by Xie Boliang.²⁹

Xiong and Liu examine some particular viewpoints in Republican China. Intellectuals such as Jiang Guanyun, Wang Guowei, Cai Yuanpei, Hu Shi, Lu Xun, Zhu Guangqian, and Qian Zhongshu, are mentioned with their respective understandings of the concept of tragedy; while the iconoclastic implication behind the negation of the Chinese tragedy is particularly emphasised. Shi traces the influence of realism on the Chinese perception of tragedy. To her, this literary realist trend is predominant throughout the entire modern period: in the 1920s, it produces the slogan “literature for life” as well as a series of social problem plays; in the 1930s, it highlights the social significance of tragedy by focusing on the conflict between mankind and the external environment; in the 1940s, it becomes a common pursuit for the dramatists to express their political ideals through the presentation of the tragic confrontations between the old and new forces. Xie examines in particular the development of the concept of tragedy in theoretical discussions during the modern period. He groups the viewpoints according to the different perspectives of modern

²⁷ Xiong Yuanyi, and Liu Wenji, “Jindai yilai Zhongguo ren dui Zhongguo beiju de renshi” (The Chinese knowledge about Chinese tragedy since the modern period), *Yunmeng xuekan* (Journal of yunmeng) 26, no. 1 (2005): 76-88, doi:10.3969/j.issn.1006-6365.2005.01.019.

²⁸ Shi Xiaoli, “Ershi shiji Zhongguo beiju lilun de lishi zouxiang” (The historical direction of the theory of tragedy in 20th-century China), *Xibei daxue xuebao, zhexue shehui kexue ban* (Journal of Northwest University, Philosophy and social sciences) 38, no. 6 (2008): 95-98.

²⁹ Xie Boliang, *Zhongguo beiju meixue shi* (History of the aesthetics of Chinese tragedy) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2014).

intellectuals, for example, the cultural ideological readings by Hu Shi and Lu Xun; the pragmatic readings by the leftists such as Hong Shen, Ma Yanxiang, and Ouyang Yuqian; and the aesthetic readings by Zhu Guangqian and Xiong Foxi.

Generally speaking, the existing research on modern Chinese introduction and interpretation of the concept of tragedy on the one hand identifies the foreign ancestries of the Chinese tragic tradition, on the other hand places the development of modern Chinese discourse on tragedy in the context of comparative literary studies. These two aspects are also the major concerns of this study. However, both the general reviews of the overall literary trends and the specific studies of the reception of the concept of tragedy have left some gaps: while the former shares a similar perspective with the literary companions and histories mentioned above and thus lacks detailed analysis of the evaluation of a modern Chinese tragic perception, the latter stays more or less on the level of simple presentations of the intellectual discourse. Therefore, this study will not only look into the specific texts of the scholarly debates influenced by the two major foreign literary trends – realism and romanticism – that have shaped the modern Chinese appropriation of tragedy, but, more importantly, will investigate how and why the Chinese approaches differentiate the concept of tragedy from its foreign origins. It also explores the changing relationship between the realist and the romantic literary perspectives during the formation of a modern Chinese tragic tradition – a point that indicates the inextricable link between literature and politics in Republican China.

The exploration of the uniqueness of modern Chinese tragic perception derives from the academic reconsideration of the Chinese tragic tradition, which is a popular trend especially in recent Chinese academia. It has been well-established in both the Euro-American and contemporary Chinese literary discourse, that the term “tragedy” is usually approached through its dramatic and aesthetic meanings; however, rather than discussing a Chinese tragedy as drama, contemporary Chinese scholars are more concerned with exploring and acknowledging the Chinese notion of *the tragic* in its

aesthetic sense. In this respect, Zhang Fa's *Zhongguo wenhua yu beiju yishi* (Chinese culture and the tragic consciousness),³⁰ and Qiu Zihua's *Beiju jingshen he minzu yishi* (The tragic spirit and national consciousness),³¹ are examples which attempt to explore a shared aesthetic expression of *the tragic* between Chinese and foreign literary traditions.

Zhang distinguishes among terms of “tragedy” (*beiju*), “the tragic” (*beiju xing*), and “tragic consciousness” (*beiju yishi*). To him, “tragedy” is a particular type of drama, and “the tragic” is the essence of tragedy that exists across genres; while “tragic consciousness” is a cultural perception of the tragic sense, which summarises the universal features of the notion of tragedy among different cultures and civilizations. Qiu interprets “the tragic” (*beiju xing*) as an aesthetic presentation of life's misery. He holds that there is an instinct in human nature to struggle for survival in adversity; therefore, he considers this awareness of resistance as a typical “tragic spirit” (*beiju jingshen*) which reveals the significance of human existence.

This perspective is in accordance with the recent research on modern Chinese literary practice of *the tragic*, in which both the dramatic and non-dramatic literatures are looked into. This kind of research focuses on some modern writers and their tragic works, including the close readings of the tragic narratives, as well as the comparison of one or several Chinese works with their specific foreign influences. Examples are Chen Shouzhong's “Guo Moruo de lishi beiju suo shou Gede yu Xile de yingxiang” (The influence of Goethe and Schiller on Guo Moruo's history tragedy),³² Alexa Huang's “Tropes of Solitude and Lu Xun's Tragic Characters”,³³ Liang

³⁰ Zhang Fa, *Zhongguo wenhua yu beiju yishi* (Chinese culture and the tragic consciousness) (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 1989).

³¹ Qiu Zihua, *Beiju jingshen he minzu yishi* (The tragic spirit and national consciousness) (Wuhan: Huazhong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1990).

³² Chen Shouzhong, “Guo Moruo de lishi beiju suo shou Gede yu Xile de yingxiang” (The influence of Goethe and Schiller on Guo Moruo's history tragedy), *Xiju lilun wenji* (Essay collection of dramatic theory) (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1988), 325-360.

³³ Alexa Huang (Alexander C.Y. Huang), “Tropes of Solitude and Lu Xun's Tragic Characters,” *Neohelicon* 37 (2010): 349-357, doi:10.1007/s11059-009-0035-z.

Miller's *Western Myths and Construction of Cao Yu's Two Tragedies*,³⁴ and Ma Hui's *Minzu beiju yishi yu geti yishu biaoixian* (The national tragic consciousness and the individual artistic presentation).³⁵

Chen studies the influence Guo Moruo receives from the German poets Goethe and Schiller, especially in his six tragedies written in the 1940s. To Chen, Guo's wartime history plays resemble works of Goethe and Schiller in the way that they, on the one hand, share a similar literary realist concern about the socio-political agenda of anti-feudalism and resistance against foreign invasion, while on the other hand, they also carry the same romantic features of poetic lyricism and idealisation in theme and characterisation. Huang regards the core of Lu Xun's tragic narrative as having a strong sense of solitude, of nothingness, and of absurdity, and analyses this feature in Lu's collection of short stories *Yecao* (Wild Grass, 1927). He associates the literary expression of *the tragic* with Lu's perception of "tragedy almost devoid of incident" (*jihu wushi de beiju*), and then interprets the aesthetic implications of Lu's tragic vision as derived from his personal experience of loneliness and isolation in the 1920s. Miller provides a detailed case study of Cao Yu's two tragedies, *Leiyu* (Thunderstorm, 1934) and *Yuanye* (Wilderness, 1937), in terms of how they have interpreted and incorporated the Greek myths in their respective tragic narratives. She explores the imprints of the myth of Phaedra on *Leiyu*, and the myth of Orestes on *Yuanye*, both of which give shape to the philosophical aesthetics of these two Chinese tragedies. Ma's study, on the other hand, is more comprehensive in a way that it not only summarises the general features of modern Chinese literary practice of *the tragic* at different phases of development, but also includes a group of writers, such as Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Yu Dafu, Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Lao She, and Cao Yu, within the research scope for both the analysis of their respective tragic narratives

³⁴ Liang L Miller, *Western Myths and Construction of Cao Yu's Two Tragedies* (Ann Arbor, MI: Proquest, Umi Dissertation Publishing, 2012).

³⁵ Ma Hui, *Minzu beiju yishi yu geti yishu biaoixian* (The national tragic consciousness and the individual artistic presentation) (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2006).

and the comparison among works of different types.

In conclusion, the examination of the aesthetic development of *the tragic* in modern Chinese literary practice provides this study with a practical foundation from which to expand its focus from the drama to the non-dramatic genres of tragic literature; while the specific research on a group of modern writers serves as examples for this study to concentrate upon the features of their tragic narratives in the light of the particular foreign influences they have received. However, there is still lacking a detailed, coherent study of how the modern writers and their works have been interpreted, assessed, and accepted by their contemporary critics in Republican China; also, the connection between the literary practice and the theoretical discussions during the same period needs further investigation. This study is thus mainly concerned with the Chinese appropriation of *the tragic* in the Republican period, with particular notice of whether and how the theory has been applied to the practice at the time. As the pragmatic and aesthetic perspectives in theoretical discussions have paralleled the trends of realism and romanticism in literary creativity and criticism, this study will explore the relevance of this phenomenon to the formation of a modern Chinese discourse on tragedy.

METHODOLOGIES AND SCOPE

Discourse analysis is the main method this study uses to examine those literary texts produced in Republican China. This approach checks both the scholarly discussions of the concept of tragedy in theory, and the contemporary reviews of some specific tragic works. It aims to explore how the establishment of an entirely new set of intellectual discourse has determined the formation and characteristics of a modern Chinese tragic literary tradition, as well as how the theorists, writers, and critics in Republican China have used the concept of tragedy to construct their own literary, cultural, and political identities when being confronted by the drastic social change in the first half of the 20th century.

Discourse analysis originally develops in the field of linguistic studies.³⁶ It later receives notable influences from the French cultural historian Michel Foucault, who defines “discourse” as “the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation”.³⁷ As a typical research perspective that is “best seen as a cluster of related methods for studying language use and its role in social life”³⁸, discourse analysis focuses on the process of meaning production, and is therefore applied to a variety of academic disciplines concerning the operating mechanism of certain cultural and political practices in determining people’s understanding of social relations as well as shaping their own identities. The application of discourse analysis to literary studies brings new perspectives to deal with its own problems in this field: for one thing, text is considered to be an autonomous institution that contains a whole set of self-referential meanings; for another, the relevant socio-cultural elements are seen as influential to or determinative of the production and consumption of literature. In other words, discourse analysis in literary studies sees texts as an interrelated network containing not only the literary works themselves but also the social and ideological conditions that shaping the characteristics and acceptance of them.

Since this study is concerned with how the concept of tragedy has entered into modern Chinese literary theory and practice, it needs to take into consideration of not only the contents of the scholarly discussions, but more importantly the exact process of how and why such discussions have been produced in this way. Therefore, discourse analysis is taken up to investigate in particular the relation between text and context in the formation of a modern Chinese tragic tradition. By focusing on the

³⁶ Zellig Harris (1909-1992), the American structural linguistic, is among the first to come up with this term in the study of the “connected speech or writing”. See Zellig S. Harris, “Discourse Analysis,” *Language* 28, no. 1 (1952): 1-30.

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1972), 107.

³⁸ Lisa M. Given, ed., *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, vol. 1 (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2008), 217.

power relationships among various cultural, social, and political elements that manipulate the intellectual practices, discourse analysis shows its advantages in providing a relatively comprehensive review of the modern Chinese interpretation of the concept of tragedy from different dimensions of this issue.

According to the available research materials this study has consulted, the application of discourse analysis in Chinese literary studies demonstrates the following features: first, this method has a rather late entry in the tradition of Chinese literary criticism,³⁹ and is thus quite immature in terms of both the number and the depth of research compared with that in Euro-American literary studies; second, the existing scholarship focus more on either the close study of some specific works or the development of Chinese literary discourse as a whole, while the examination of the formation of the critical discourse on a particular literary genre remains largely untouched. This study involves discourse analysis from the perspective of conceptual history in the sense that modern Chinese literary discourse on Tragedy is formulated during the constant interactions between the author and the reader; therefore, the main task for textual interpretation in this study is to examine how different understandings of the concept of tragedy have been encoded and decoded in both theory and practice through modern Chinese intellectual activities.

In this respect, this study combines discourse analysis with the comparative literary approach: on the one hand, it traces the modern Chinese interpretation of the concept of tragedy in light of several typical foreign theories; on the other hand, it examines the reception of *the tragic* as a literary theme or mode in modern Chinese literary criticism of some specific works, comparing its features with those in Euro-American critical tradition. The former focuses on the construction of the discourse on Tragedy at the theoretical level, and the latter concentrates on the

³⁹ It is usually acknowledged that the Chinese linguist Hu Zhuanglin (1933-) is among the first to introduce the term “literary discourse” (*wenxue huayu*) into Chinese literary criticism in the 1980s. See relevant discussion in Shi Shengxun, “Wenxue huayu benti lun: wenxue guannian, huayu fenxi yu Zhongguo wenti” (A discussion of the ontology of literary discourse: The concept of literature, discourse analysis, and the Chinese problem), *Han yuyan wenxue yanjiu* (Chinese language and literature research) 3 (2014): 57-69.

application of the established critical discourse in literary practice. Both of these two aspects are discussed in terms of the similarities and differences between Chinese and Euro-American perceptions of tragedy. In addition, comparisons are also made among different phases of modern Chinese literature. To be specific, the diachronic approach is used to compare the respective characteristics of modern Chinese tragic perceptions in theoretical discussions and literary creativity across times.

This study adopts a chronological approach to the analysis of the texts produced in Republican China. It follows the established method of periodisation in the existing scholarly research, starting the modern period of Chinese literature in 1917 when Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu published their articles⁴⁰ on *Xin qingnian* (New youth) declaring the beginning of a complete literary revolution, and ending it in 1949 when the establishment of People's Republic of China marked the birth of a new society as well as a new literature.⁴¹ The existing research of this kind normally divides the thirty-two years of modern Chinese literature into three phases based on specific literary and historical events of each period: the first ten years from 1917 to 1927 is marked by the May Fourth and New Culture Movement with a literary agenda of counter-tradition; the second ten years from 1928 to 1937 by the rise of the left-wing literary trend and the strengthening connection between literature and politics; the third ten years by the Anti-Japanese War from 1937 to 1949 when the entire literary field was concerned primarily with national salvation. This study explores the relationship between the development of one particular genre and of literature as a whole; it observes specific changes in modern Chinese interpretation and expression of *the tragic* across time. Therefore, this study takes the well-established

⁴⁰ Hu Shi, "Wenxue gailiang chuyi" (Tentative proposal for literary reform), *Xin qingnian* (New youth) 2, no. 5 (1917): 26-36; Chen Duxiu, "Wenxue geming lun" (On literary revolution), *Xin qingnian* (New youth) 2, no. 6 (1917): 6-9.

⁴¹ See, for example, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshi nian* (Three decades in modern Chinese literature), eds. Qian Liqun, Wen Rumin, and Wu Fuhui (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998); *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sichao shilun* (A historical account on modern Chinese literary thought), Lu Hongtao (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2005); *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, Kang-I Sun Chang, and Stephen Owen (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

periodisation as a background to demonstrate the overall literary landscape, in order to investigate whether and how the discourse on tragedy has been in line with the prevailing literary trends during a certain period of time in modern Chinese literature.

Contrary to Foucault's "indifference" towards the identity of the discourse producers,⁴² this study holds that those who have discussed and practised the concept of tragedy have played a crucial role in the formation of a modern Chinese tragic tradition, because by promoting their respective understandings they have actually encoded the discourse on tragedy with certain ideological or political implications. In this respect, the issue of "who was speaking" is of equal importance with "what was said". There are in general two groups of modern intellectuals constructing the discourse on tragedy in Republican China: those who introduce and debate the concept of tragedy, and those who assess and reinvent the tragic implications in literary works. The former establishes a theoretical framework of tragedy, while the latter constructs a tragic tradition in literary criticism. This study examines documents from both of these two fields, in order to build connections between theory and practice.

The selection of sources defines and justifies this study's position with the existing scholarship, as "after all, the mere choice of a text for analysis and interpretation already implicates a value judgment".⁴³ The construction of a modern Chinese tragic tradition is a complex process in which the interplay of cultural, social, and political factors remains significant. Consequently, the scholarly discussions and debates in the Republican era are inevitably "selective" about specific terms and theories, or to a certain extent "biased" by certain ideological and political stances. To present how this potential "subjectivity" has come into play, this study collects the textual resources mainly within the scope of the "mainstream" scholarly research on

⁴² See Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 187.

⁴³ Robert de Beaugrande, "Discourse Analysis and Literary Theory: Closing the Gap," *Journal of Advanced Composition* 13, no. 2 (1993): 426.

tragedy, in order to demonstrate the formation of a modern tragic tradition in its most accepted way. Apart from focusing on the primary resource of related newspapers, magazines, and monographs officially published in Republican China, this study also refers to later reviews of some specific writers and works to present the variety and complexity of the intellectual discourse in both modern and contemporary periods. Those texts are the secondary resources that are based on the established research findings in current academia. In addition, the standard histories and companions of literature also serve as an important reference, so as to provide reference to the authors and works being discussed in this study.

ORIGINALITY AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The above literature review indicates the current gap of the study of tragedy in the field of Chinese literary studies: on the one hand, there is hardly any detailed discussion of or intentional distinction between the theatrical and aesthetical meanings of tragedy during the formation process of modern Chinese literary discourse on Tragedy; on the other hand, the connection between theory and practice in relation to the Chinese acceptance of the concept of tragedy in the Republican period is left almost untouched. Besides, the examination of the scholarly debates over the concept of tragedy, as well as the reception of certain tragic works in contemporary literary criticism, remain largely limited without seeing *tragedy* or *the tragic* as developing concepts in modern Chinese literary context.

This study aims to fill the gap in these following aspects: firstly, it connects the theoretical construction of the concept of tragedy with the literary practice of *the tragic*, exploring possible factors that have either promoted or prevented the application of theory into practice; secondly, it traces the changing relationship between the pragmatic/political perspective and the non-utilitarian/aesthetic perspective during the formation of modern Chinese intellectual discourse on Tragedy, analysing its relevance to the inextricable link between literature and politics in Republican China; thirdly, it investigates the differences between the

tragic perceptions of modern China and its foreign origins, presenting the constant interplay among several cultural, social, and political elements that have affected the establishment of a modern Chinese tragic tradition. Through these contributions, this study hopes to provide a relatively thorough and detailed research of the development of the concept of tragedy in modern Chinese literary context, which not only has summarised the existing research achievements but also gives some enlightenment to the later scholarship in the same field.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

This study consists of four chapters. The first chapter begins with clarifications of terminologies that are key to the formation of the discourse on tragedy in Chinese academia. It first takes a brief review of the long-lasting debates on whether there is a Chinese tragedy in both the modern and contemporary Chinese literary discourse. It then explores the possible causal factors behind this unsettled question, analysing in particular the confusion between different meanings of tragedy in current Chinese scholarly research – that is, between *tragedy* as a dramatic genre and *the tragic* as an aesthetic idea. The notion of tragedy in European intellectual history has gone through a systematic evolutionary process from the domain of literature to philosophical aesthetics; however, the modern Chinese introduction of this notion has been from the very beginning lacking a clear distinction among different meanings of this term. In addition, the active practices of *the tragic* in some non-dramatic literary forms in modern Chinese literature – especially in novels and short stories – have further expanded the notion of tragedy across genres. For this reason, it is more appropriate for this study to use the term “the tragic” when examining the formation of a modern Chinese tragic tradition, as well as demonstrating the overall development of the concept of tragedy in both dramatic and non-dramatic literature in Republican China.

The second, third, and fourth chapters constitute the main body of this study. Being divided according to different phases in modern Chinese literature, each of the

three chapters deals respectively with the theoretical discussions and the literary practice of the idea of the tragic. The second chapter focuses on the period of the New Culture Movement from 1917 to 1927, when the counter-traditional and iconoclastic agenda dominates the overall literary field and has left direct and obvious impacts on the formation of a modern Chinese discourse on tragedy. The advocacy of tragedy in theory and practice at this time is largely driven by cultural and social imperatives, in that it goes hand in hand with the rejection of the existing literary tradition and with the appeal for a complete literary and social revolution. Consequently, the notion of tragedy is mainly interpreted as a faithful presentation of life and society; the *Datanyuan* ending pattern in traditional Chinese literature thus receives sharp criticism for its deliberate pursuit of perfection rather than facing directly the miseries in social reality. The theoretical discussions are divided in the main by two different perspectives, namely, utilitarianism and aestheticism, which correspond with the major literary movements of realism and romanticism; yet, given the overt socio-political intentions manipulating the intellectual debates, the pragmatic realist concern has prevailed in both theory and practice.

The third chapter examines theories and writings produced from 1928 to 1937. This period is usually known for the rise of the leftist literary group, whose political standpoint greatly strengthens the connection between literature and politics. The discourse on tragedy at this time has developed some new features. On the one hand, the foreign influences on both theory and practice are more specific and concrete, and this has attracted the intellectual focus in a rather exclusive way on tragedy itself. In theoretical discussions, the concept of tragedy has no longer been directly referred to as an ideological weapon of counter tradition; instead, scholars are more concerned with a comprehensive and coherent introduction of foreign terms – especially the Aristotelian concepts. This situation produces in literary creativity a flourishing of the Chinese imitations of foreign literature. Works of Cao Yu, Ba Jin, and Mao Dun written during this period are representative of the Chinese versions of

Euro-American tragic themes, such as the in vain resistance against the unpredictable yet overwhelming forces beyond human control, and the doomed destruction of mankind in the struggle. On the other hand, the connection between theory and practice is comparatively looser. Taking the political affiliation as an example: in theoretical discussions, it is not an obvious determining factor in grouping scholars according to their understandings of the concept of tragedy, as some shared concerns across different literary societies are observable at this time; while in contemporary criticism, such an element is largely decisive of the assessment of particular tragic works, because the perspective of realism remains overwhelming regardless of the writers' obvious aesthetic or romantic implications.

The fourth chapter centres on the wartime construction of the discourse on tragedy from 1937 to 1949. The outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War has changed fundamentally the development trajectory of modern Chinese tragic tradition, in that it interrupts the active theoretical discussions and homogenises the literary subjects with an overt and unified political theme. The concept of tragedy during this period is enriched by a positive, uplifting, and optimistic tone, which serves as a revolutionary spirit encouraging the Chinese to strive towards a final victory. This new interpretation differs greatly from those in the past decades that emphasise mainly the miserable and grievous aspects in *the tragic*, and is thus a unique product of the wartime need to inspire and motivate the people. In theoretical discussions, the previous diversities among different literary camps concerning the concept of tragedy merge with, and are strengthened by, the politicisation of literature; while in literary creativity, there is an attempt to converge the realist and romantic approaches in both writing and criticism. The artistic features and contemporary reviews of Guo Moruo's wartime history plays exemplify this trend, as a combination of the literary realist concern over national salvation and the romantic expression of imagination and lyricism is palpable in his tragic narrative. This convergence provides a relatively new pattern for the interplay between realism and romanticism on modern

Chinese literary practice of *the tragic*, as the latter, rather than being completely rejected in the past, is somewhat accepted by or voluntarily incorporated into the former to better fulfil the pragmatic task assigned to tragedy by the war.

I One Problem: Terminology – Approaching the Subject⁴⁴

Whether there is an indigenous tradition of tragedy in Chinese literature has haunted Chinese scholars for a long period of time. For many decades, they have been trying to acknowledge the generic legitimacy of the so-called “Chinese tragedy”. Generally, they prefer to establish their research foundations upon the comparative study of the tragic traditions between China and the West. However, this approach often encounters paradoxical consequences, because the notion of the tragic is itself borrowed from foreign intellectual context. As a result, some Chinese scholars constantly find themselves being caught in a dilemma of identification, in that the more references they make to foreign theories the less convincing facts they observe in confirming the indigenous authenticity of Chinese tragedy.

In fact, the term “Chinese tragedy” remains contested ever since the concept of tragedy was introduced into modern Chinese literature at the beginning of the 20th century. The diametrically opposed understandings of this issue led to the formation of two intellectual camps: the former examined those tragic works in traditional Chinese literature in the light of European theories, and concluded with the negation of the existence of a Chinese tragedy; the latter went against the strict compliance with foreign standards, and tried to acknowledge the unique characteristics of Chinese tragic literature. Chronologically, these two camps belonged in general terms to different phases of the history of Chinese literary criticism: the former to the modern period, when the need for a complete literary revolution and the concern with the relationship between literature and politics dominated the major interest of literary criticism; the latter to the contemporary period, when the trend to re-evaluate Chinese tragic works in the context of China-West comparative literary studies began to prevail from the 1980s onwards. Consequently, the so-called “debates” between

⁴⁴ This chapter touches upon certain particular features of the modern Chinese interpretation of the concept of tragedy but will not go into detail at this point, as they will be further demonstrated and analysed respectively in the following chapters.

the two camps should actually be more accurately described as a later revision to the previous opinions. This recognition process of defining the Chinese tragedy may also arouse concerns over the establishment of assessment criteria, which has something to do with the Chinese appropriation of foreign terminologies and concepts.

According to Yun-tong Luk, the question of “whether there is a Chinese tragedy” is to a certain degree crucial to the study of tragic literature, because “to hypothesize about the presence of tragedy in Chinese drama or to talk about its absence posits problems that concern the nature of means and ends in Chinese-Western comparative literature studies”.⁴⁵ As far as this study is concerned, it is more important to know the “whys” alongside the “whats” with regard to how those arguments regarding the contested nature of the Chinese tragedy are initiated and organised, in order to better understand the formation of a modern Chinese literary discourse on tragedy. Therefore, this chapter will not take part in the current academic discussions of whether Chinese literature has ever nourished such a literary form that is eligible to be identified as tragedy, but will instead examine those literary views from both sides of the debate to see what may be the factors making this subject a constant controversy.

1.1 DEBATE REVISITED: IS THERE A CHINESE TRAGEDY?

The Chinese acceptance of the term “tragedy” in the early 20th century was first of all accompanied by an overall rejection of its existing literary tradition; as a result, the prevailing intellectual opinions towards a Chinese tragedy during the Republican period were in general terms negative. Scholars in the New Culture Movement, such as Hu Shi and Fu Sinian, centred their arguments primarily on the critique of the ending pattern of *Datanyuan* that was popular in the Chinese literary tradition; therefore, they regarded this pattern as one of the significant defects downgrading

⁴⁵ Yun-tong Luk, “The Concept of Tragedy as Genre and Its Applicability to Classical Chinese Drama,” in *The Chinese Text – Studies in Comparative Literature*, ed. Ying-hsiung Chou (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1986), 22.

Chinese literature to “a literature of deception”.⁴⁶ This attitude was largely inherited by later intellectuals, even when the *Datanyuan* was no longer considered the sole criterion for defining a Chinese tragedy. Examples are the research of Zhu Guangqian, Qian Zhongshu, and Tang Junyi in the 1930s and 1940s, which based their rejections of the Chinese tragedy on the exploration of some cultural and ideological factors.

Meanwhile, an opposite viewpoint has emerged in recent decades, attempting to justify the unique features of Chinese tragic works through searching for new assessment criteria rather than rigidly applying those foreign theories.⁴⁷ Scholars of this group value the literary and aesthetic traditions of China, insisting that “the unique artistic features of Chinese tragedies [should] not be neglected” in defining a Chinese tragedy.⁴⁸ Consequently, they aim to explore the differences between foreign and Chinese tragic literatures, and highlight them not as defects but as something exclusive to the Chinese literary tradition.

Yao Yiwei’s opinion is typical and representative of those who advocate a redefinition of tragedy in recent Chinese literary criticism:

Chinese literature has been bred in an ideology entirely different from that of the West; therefore, it is not possible to find such a literary form as the Chinese tragedy with similar features to either the Greek tragedy or the English Renaissance tragedy. [In this

⁴⁶ Hu Shi, “Wenxue jinhua guannian yu xiju gailiang” (The concept of literary evolution and the theatre reform), first published in *Xin qingnian* (New youth) 5, no. 4 (1918), reprinted in *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi: jianshe lilun ji* (Compendium of Chinese new literature: volume on theoretical development), ed. Hu Shi (Shanghai: Liangyou tushu yinshua gongsi, 1935), 382.

⁴⁷ The compilation project of “Top ten classical Chinese tragedies” (*Zhongguo shida gudian beiju*) conducted by Wang Jisi in 1980 initiated the debate over the criterion standard of tragedy; scholars such as Shao Zengqi (“Shitan Zhongguo gudian xiqu zhong de beiju” (On the tragedy of traditional Chinese opera, 1983)), Ye Changhai (“*Mudan ting* de beixiju yinsu” (The tragicomical elements of *Peony Pavilion*, 1983)), Dong Meikan (*Wu da mingju lun* (On the five famous plays, 1984)), Zeng Qingyuan (*Beiju lun* (On tragedy, 1987)), Chang Chia-Jung (*Zhongguo gudian beiju lunding yu goucheng zhi niyi* (Hypothesis of the definition and composition of Chinese classical tragedies, 1998)) took part in the discussions on how to appropriately define a Chinese tragedy.

⁴⁸ Qiao Dewen, “Zhongxi beiju guan tanyi” (The discussion on the differences between Chinese and Western notions of tragedy), *Xiqu yishu* (The art of opera) 1 (1982): 77. See also relevant discussions in Xiong Yuanyi, *Zhongguo beiju yinlun* (Introduction to Chinese tragedy) (Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe, 2007); Xie Boliang, *Zhongguo beiju shigang* (The history of Chinese tragedy) (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1993).

case] one may go further to claim the absence of tragedy in Chinese dramatic tradition. [...] However, if we can redefine tragedy from a perspective more general and extensive, [...] it is reasonable to acknowledge the existence of a Chinese tragedy based on a mode of “tragic sense of life” [*rensheng de beiju gan*], which is revealed through quite a few Chinese literary works.⁴⁹

Yao’s statement suggests a shift of focus from those viewpoints in the Republican period: rather than counterposing the Chinese and foreign concepts of tragedy, he searches for a common ground or “an overlapping domain” in assessing Chinese tragedy, which reveals “the distinctive features of Chinese literature and at the same time conforms to Western theories”.⁵⁰ A similar example comes from another defender of Chinese tragedy, Zhang Fa, who calls for an establishment of new principles to legitimise the existing tragic elements in Chinese literature: “We should avoid making the Western tragic sense the sole criterion to measure works from other literary origins. A higher standard needs to be created, so that the Chinese notion can find its underpinnings, while the Western notion still comes into play; I call this ‘higher standard’ the universal tragic sense of human beings.”⁵¹ This standpoint represents the trend in current Chinese academia to explore in a broader sense the tragic elements in Chinese literature. To scholars of this group, it seems that the only way to legitimise the Chinese tragedy is to extend the concept of tragedy from the theatrical domain to the aesthetic domain. There are even such suggestions to further blur the concept of tragedy in literary criticism: “apart from drama, it [the term “tragedy”] should also be able to refer to some related literary elements, such as the tragic [*beiju xing*], the tragic consciousness [*beiju yishi*], as well as all other artistic

⁴⁹ Yao Yiwei, “Yuan zaju zhong beiju guan chutan” (The preliminary exploration of the concept of tragedy in Yuan drama), in *Zhongwai bijiao wenxue de lichen bei* (The landmark for Chinese and foreign comparative literature), eds. John Deeney, and Luo Gang (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1997), 376-377.

⁵⁰ Wang Deyan, “Zhongguo beiju wenti de qitu yu xiwang” (Perplexity and prospect of the problem of Chinese tragedy), *Beifang gongye daxue xuebao* (Journal of North China University of Technology) 13, no. 2 (2001): 65, doi:10.3969/j.issn.1001-5477.2001.04.012.

⁵¹ Zhang Fa, *Zhongguo wenhua yu beiju yishi* (Chinese culture and the tragic consciousness) (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 1989), 3.

forms capable of conveying the tragic senses.”⁵²

However, another problem arises: when scholars are trying to confirm the existence of the Chinese tragedy by defending the existence of a tragic consciousness in Chinese literary traditions, they are no longer referring to “tragedy” at the genre level but more precisely “the tragic” at the aesthetic/philosophical level, which makes the debate over the genuineness of Chinese tragedy even more confused and complicated.

To explain the vital importance of this issue in approaching the problems of defining the tragedy in current Chinese academia, it is necessary to first re-examine some of the arguments produced during the Republican period, because they are actually concentrated on different facets of the concept of tragedy. Generally speaking, the rejection of Chinese tragedy at this time was formulated from two aspects. One was to negate the existence of a Chinese tragedy in its theatrical sense. The critique of the *Datanyuan* belonged to this domain, as Fu Sinian claimed that “the happy ending is the most popular pattern in Chinese dramas which is extremely loathsome”.⁵³ In line with Fu’s opinion, both Zhu Guangqian and Qian Zhongshu discussed this issue within the field of drama, declaring that “[t]ragedy, both the word and the thing, [...] is a genre of literature almost unknown to” the Chinese who did not “possess a single specimen of tragedy in the strictest sense of the word.”⁵⁴

The other aspect was to claim the absence of a notion of tragedy in Chinese literary tradition, or to quote Hu Shi, that “what the Chinese literature lacks most is a concept of tragedy”.⁵⁵ Hu further illustrated the “concept of tragedy” and contrasted

⁵² Zhang Pingren, “Zhongguo gudian beiju yanjiu fansi” (The reflection on the study of classical Chinese tragedy), *Yishu baijia* (Hundred schools in arts) 3 (2001): 17, doi:10.3969/j.issn.1003-9104.2001.03.003.

⁵³ Fu Sinian, “Lun bianzhi juben” (On the written principles of script), in *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi: jianshe lilun ji* (Compendium of Chinese new literature: Volume on theoretical development), ed. Hu Shi (Shanghai: Liangyou tushu yinshua gongsi, 1935), 390.

⁵⁴ Zhu Guangqian, *The Psychology of Tragedy* (Hong Kong: Joint Pub. Co, 1987), 201. See also Qian Zhongshu (Ch’ien Chung-shu), “Tragedy in Old Chinese Drama,” *T’ien Hsia Monthly* 1, no. 1 (1935): 38.

⁵⁵ Hu, “Wenxue jinhua guannian yu xiju gailiang” (The concept of literary evolution and the theatre reform), 382.

it to the escapism and liking for deliberate perfection in the Chinese mentality, thus bringing this literary issue into the cultural ideological realm. Other intellectuals sharing the same standpoint were Lu Xun in the 1920s and Tang Junyi in the 1940s, both of whom based their negative attitudes towards Chinese tragedies on the reflection of Chinese cultural and ideological orientation.⁵⁶ Consequently, “tragedy” in this respect referred no longer to a literary genre but to a literary notion or idea, and may be more accurately termed as “the tragic” due to its distinctive non-dramatic features. This is also the aspect to which later scholars have devoted great efforts, in the hope of acknowledging the existence of a Chinese tragedy through the recognition of a tragic consciousness in the Chinese literary tradition.

However, intellectuals in the Republican period did not intentionally try to distinguish between these two aspects in their arguments, nor have later scholars been clear enough about which aspect they are referring to when arguing against or for the existence of a Chinese tragedy. In other words, the distinction between the theatrical and aesthetic meanings of the definition of tragedy remains largely untouched in both the modern and contemporary Chinese intellectual field. This can partly explain why the debate over the existence of Chinese tragedy continues to be contested and unresolved, because the major arguments in opposition have actually been formulated in different domains. The indiscriminate use of terms, as illustrated above, has already caused certain conceptual perplexity in Chinese academia. The main problem is the confusion between the dramatic and aesthetic meanings of tragedy, or between “tragedy” and “the tragic”. It gradually becomes a noticeable issue, as such statements can easily be found by a very rough browse among those

⁵⁶ See, for instance, Lu Xun’s critique on the Chinese national character in Lu Xun, “Zhongguo xiaoshuo de lishi bianqian” (The historical changes in Chinese fiction), in *Lu Xun quanji, di jiu juan* (Complete works of Lu Xun, vol. 9) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 311-350; and Tang Junyi’s comparison of the cultural spirit between China and the west in Tang Junyi, “Zhongxi wenhua jingshen zhi bijiao” (Comparison between Chinese and Western cultural spirit), first published in *Dongfang yu xiwang* (East and West) 1, no. 1 (1947), reprinted in *Zhongxi wenhua yitong lun* (On the differences and similarities between Chinese and Western cultures), ed. Yu Longyu (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1989), 31-50.

recently published articles in Chinese academia: for example, “the existence of Chinese tragedy cannot be denied as long as the tragic consciousness exists in Chinese literature”;⁵⁷ or “the formation and development of Chinese tragedy is traceable in the history of literature, if we focus not on the rigid definition of tragedy but on the actual literary practices of the tragic consciousness”.⁵⁸

In this case, the debate of whether there is a Chinese tragedy has revealed not a simple issue of academic dispute, but a more complicated matter resulting from the problematic terminology, as well as the vague definition of tragedy in the Chinese literary field. To this study, this problem is apparently more pressing, because to acknowledge the genuine nature of Chinese tragedy would always be largely based on a somewhat questionable premise if the conceptual confusion between “tragedy” and “the tragic” continues to exist in Chinese literary criticism. This is not to say that the concept of tragedy cannot be expanded into other literary genres or academic disciplines, as the “literary description of tragedy” should “by no means [be] limited to questions of genre”⁵⁹ in both Chinese and foreign literature; nor is the aesthetic interpretation of tragic elements in Chinese literature destined to bring an arbitrary definition to tragedy, because the examination of the aesthetic features is indeed indispensable to the study of tragic literature. What matters here for the present Chinese research on tragedy is a necessity to establish a clear and proper distinction, both conceptually and lexically, between *tragedy* as a dramatic genre and *the tragic* as an aesthetic concept. The shift of focus and assessment criteria among different meanings of tragedy needs to be carried out very carefully, as it “suggests an approach so broad as to expand the concept dangerously to all works of art or plays,

⁵⁷ Li Xin, “Zhongguo youwu beiju de zai tantao” (The re-discussion on whether China has tragedy), *Dezhou xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of Dezhou College) 17, no. 1 (2001): 72, doi:10.3969/j.issn.1004-9444.2001.01.018.

⁵⁸ Ma Hui, and Wang Wanpeng, “Minzu, wenhua, shengming beiju yishi de jiaozhi – Zhongguo xiandai wenxue beiju yishi de jinghun” (The intertwining tragic consciousness of ethnicity, culture and life – The soul of tragic consciousness in modern Chinese literature), *Qinghai shehui kexue* (Qinghai social science) 5 (2012): 151, doi:10.3969/j.issn.1001-2338.2012.05.035.

⁵⁹ William Storm, *After Dionysus: A Theory of the Tragic* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), 31.

and triggers a flight of the concept to common experience unrelated to tragedy as an artefact and a theatrical performance”.⁶⁰

1.2 CLARIFICATION OF TERMS: *TRAGEDY*, *THE TRAGIC*, AND OTHERS

Yun-tong Luk mentions an example of the typical fallacy in some existing research in Chinese academia on the assessment of the Chinese tragedy:

Though the term ‘tragedy’ was not used in the classification of traditional drama in China, and though there are far fewer classical Chinese plays that can be called tragedy according to the Western dramatic theories than there are in the West, it could be dangerous to insist that in the history of Chinese theatre and drama there is no tragedy in the full sense of the word.⁶¹

According to Luk, the reference to “the full sense of the word” here is largely questionable and needs further explanation: logically, it seems to refer to tragedy as an aesthetic idea rather than a theatrical form, or it would be unnecessary to reaffirm the absence of Chinese tragic drama measured by Western standards; but if such a discussion is focusing on tragedy as an aesthetic concept, it should make clear this point with some concrete and convincing evidence from both the Chinese and Western literary contexts. Otherwise, a vague comparison results in nothing but self-contradiction and false assumptions.

A glance over the articles collected in *The China Academic Journals Database*⁶² provides Luk’s statement with more examples, because a large number of them that have the word “tragedy” (*beiju*) in the subject line are actually discussing certain tragic elements in non-dramatic literary works – such as fiction and poetry.⁶³

⁶⁰ Luk, “Concept of Tragedy,” 16.

⁶¹ Ibid., 23. Original texts from Mei-shu Hwang, “Is There Tragedy in Chinese Drama? An Experimental Look at an Old Problem,” *Tamkang Review* 10, nos. 1/2 (1979): 212.

⁶² China Academic Journals Full-text Database (accessed June 10, 2014), <http://oversea.cnki.net/kns55/brief/result.aspx?dbPrefix=CJFD>.

⁶³ Roughly 30,000 academic articles have been published in this area in the past decade (2006-2016). Just to name a few examples to illustrate this point: “Lun Yu Hua xiaoshuo de beiju tezheng” (On the characteristics of tragedy in Yu Hua’s fiction) (Zhan Ruiqing, *Neimenggu minzu daxue xuebao, shehui kexue ban* (Journal of Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities, social sciences) 35, no. 2 (2009): 40-41, doi:10.3969/j.issn.1671-0215.2009.02.010.); “Jiegou Du Fu shige de beiju jingshen” (The deconstruction of the

Scholarship of this kind refers to “tragedy” as a literary mode rather than a dramatic form, yet without providing any clear explanations as to the use of the term. In order to properly distinguish between the dramatic and aesthetic meanings of tragedy, this study would like to start with an investigation of the semantic meaning of this term in both the Euro-American and Chinese contexts, where the examination of related dictionary entries may be necessary to bring this issue back to its essence.

The common explanations of the term “tragedy” in English general dictionaries contain several usages of this word in different contexts. On the one hand, as an everyday expression, “tragedy” is usually “a disastrous event” or “misfortune”,⁶⁴ “a very sad event [...] that shocks people because it involves death”,⁶⁵ or “an event, series of events, or situation causing great suffering, destruction, or distress, and typically involving death”.⁶⁶ Therefore, the definition of “tragedy” in this sense is related to the expression of certain difficult and miserable experiences in human life. On the other hand, the literary definitions of “tragedy” also carry this core feature of “dealing with sorrowful or disastrous events”, but emphasise more “the downfall or death of the protagonist”⁶⁷ being presented together with some aesthetic or philosophical implications – usually the unfortunate person’s “potential greatness [...] cruelly wasted through error or the mysterious workings of fate”.⁶⁸

On the whole, the general dictionaries prefer clear distinctions among different meanings of tragedy; they usually associate it with a particular kind of genre in order

spirit of tragedy in Du Fu’s poetry) (Wang Weihua, *Zuojia* (Writer magazine) 12 (2007): 53.); “Yuan yu Qufu de beiju yishi” (“Resentment” and the consciousness of tragedy in Qu Yuan’s prose) (Zhang Hengxue, *Yunmeng xuekan* (Journal of yunmeng) 4 (2000): 5-8.).

⁶⁴ Merriam-Webster Online, s.v. “Tragedy,” accessed July 14, 2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tragedy>.

⁶⁵ Idoconline, s.v. “Tragedy,” accessed July 14, 2014, <http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/tragedy>.

⁶⁶ Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “Tragedy,” accessed July 14, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204352?redirectedFrom=tragedy>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Dinah Birch, “Tragedy,” *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 7th ed, Oxfordreference.com, last modified 2009, accessed July 15, 2014, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192806871.001.0001/acref-9780192806871-e-7577>.

to divorce its literary sense from the everyday usage. For example, both the *Longman Dictionary* and the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* narrow down the definition of tragedy to “a serious play”⁶⁹ or “the literary genre of tragic dramas”;⁷⁰ while the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines tragedy according to different forms of expression it acquires in the history of literature: first “a medieval narrative or narrative poem”, then “a classical or Renaissance verse drama”, and later “a drama of a similar nature but typically written in prose”.⁷¹ The literary dictionaries, on the other hand, are comparatively more inclusive in regarding “tragedy” as a developing concept and literary form: it can be a “serious play”⁷² or dramatic work,⁷³ but also “by extension, a novel”⁷⁴ or other narrative works.⁷⁵ Additional explanations are often made to the latter: for instance, according to Chris Baldick, certain novels by Thomas Hardy, Malcolm Lowry, and Edith Wharton can be referred to as tragedies because “they describe the downfall of a central character”;⁷⁶ Dinah Birch shares the same opinion in referring to some non-dramatic works “aiming at traditional tragic effects” capable of being regarded as “tragedy”.⁷⁷ In a word, it is a common practice for English general dictionaries to provide clear distinctions among different meanings and

⁶⁹ *Idoceonline*, s.v. “Tragedy,” accessed July 14, 2014, <http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/tragedy>.

⁷⁰ *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. “Tragedy,” accessed 14 July, 2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tragedy>.

⁷¹ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Tragedy,” accessed July 14, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204352?redirectedFrom=tragedy>.

⁷² Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 226.

⁷³ Margaret Drabble, Jenny Stringer, and Daniel Hahn, “Tragedy,” *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 3rd ed, Oxfordreference.com, last modified 2007, accessed July 15, 2014, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199214921.001.0001/acref-9780199214921-e-6151>.

⁷⁴ Baldick, *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 226.

⁷⁵ Dinah Birch, “Tragedy,” *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 7th ed, Oxfordreference.com, last modified 2009, accessed July 15, 2014, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192806871.001.0001/acref-9780192806871-e-7577>.

⁷⁶ Baldick, *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 227.

⁷⁷ Dinah Birch, “Tragedy,” *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 7th ed, Oxfordreference.com, last modified 2009, accessed July 15, 2014, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192806871.001.0001/acref-9780192806871-e-7577>.

usages of the term “tragedy”, in which the content (the presentation of mankind’s disastrous and miserable experiences) is valued more than the form (the particular genre that serves to the tragic expression) in defining the core features of tragedy.

The corresponding Chinese semantic context sees a similar trend: definitions of “tragedy” in general dictionaries focus more on the term’s dramatic attributes, while in literary dictionaries the category is relatively broad. Being intentionally separated from its everyday usage of “something unfortunate”,⁷⁸ “tragedy” as a literary term is defined in official Chinese general dictionaries first as “a type of drama featured with the presentation of the unreconciled conflicts between the protagonist and reality, as well as the consequent miserable endings”.⁷⁹ The literary dictionaries, in addition, usually discuss further about the artistic effects and different forms of expression of tragedy. In their explanations, “tragedy” is not only “a type of drama that presents certain conflicts with profound social significance, [...] aiming at arousing grief, sympathy, and respect among the audience through the presentation of failure, frustration, or destruction the protagonist encounters during his confrontation with reality”;⁸⁰ but also “an aesthetic concept in a broad sense as an important form of expression more profound and concrete than the sense of pure sublime [*chonggao*]”.⁸¹ In this respect, the term “tragedy” is often included in the aesthetic domain to describe a particular aesthetic experience upon seeing “the destined defeat, death, or pains caused by mankind’s inevitable conflict with the society”. Yet, this sense is at the same time clearly distinctive from the daily experiences of sadness and

⁷⁸ *Xiandai hanyu cidian* (The contemporary Chinese dictionary) (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2013), 53, s.v. “beiju” (tragedy); *Xinhua zidian* (New Chinese dictionary) (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2013), 43, s.v. “beiju” (tragedy).

⁷⁹ Luo Zhufeng, ed., *Hanyu da cidian, di qi juan* (The comprehensive Chinese dictionary, vol. 7) (Shanghai: Hanyu da cidian chubanshe, 1994), 574, s.v. “beiju” (tragedy); see also, *Xiandai hanyu cidian* (The contemporary Chinese dictionary) (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2013), 53, s.v. “beiju” (tragedy); *Xinhua zidian* (New Chinese dictionary) (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2013), 43, s.v. “beiju” (tragedy).

⁸⁰ Zhou Hongxing, ed., *Jianming wenxue cidian* (The concise dictionary of literature) (Beijing: Zuo jia chubanshe, 1988), 47, s.v. “beiju” (tragedy).

⁸¹ *Meixue baike quanshu* (The encyclopaedia of aesthetics) (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 1990), 17, s.v. “beiju” (tragedy).

misfortune, in a way that “it reflects and epitomises those tragic events or phenomena of certain social significance”.⁸² Therefore, the aesthetic sense of tragedy “exists across genre in serious dramas, comedies, or other artistic forms”.⁸³ Apparently, the dramatic attributes of tragedy are less emphasised when this term is discussed and used as an aesthetic concept in contemporary Chinese dictionaries; that is to say, the Chinese academic tradition can also recognise the differences between tragedy’s dramatic and aesthetic meanings, and accordingly make a conceptual distinction between them.

However, if the distinction between the dramatic and aesthetic meanings of tragedy is not at all impossible in the Chinese semantic context, there must be some other reasons for the terminological confusion in current Chinese academia. It is perhaps a unique Chinese problem, because the European scholarship does not seem to have been haunted by a similar issue throughout the development of its research on tragedy.

One possible reason may lie in the different ways the concept of tragedy has emerged, formulated, and then expanded into other literary genres or disciplines between European and Chinese critical traditions. The origin of European tragedy dates back to ancient Greece, when a flourishing theatre endows the tragedy with an intrinsic dramatic property. The success of some later playwrights has strengthened the connection between tragedy and the dramatic form of expression, hence “[setting] the norm in a way that cannot be claimed for any other work”⁸⁴ for a considerably long period of time. Correspondingly, European literary criticism has in the beginning concentrated mainly on tragedy’s dramatic attributes; as Aristotle creates

⁸² Wang Shide, ed., *Meixue cidian* (Dictionary of aesthetics) (Beijing: Zhishi chubanshe, 1986), 56-57, s.v. “beiju” (tragedy).

⁸³ Zhu Liyuan, ed., *Yishu meixue cidian* (Dictionary of arts and aesthetics) (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2012), 71-73, s.v. “beiju” (tragedy).

⁸⁴ Richard B Sewall, and Leonard W. Conversi, “Tragedy,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified 2016, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/art/tragedy-literature>.

different categories of literature in his *Poetics* and related tragedy directly to drama,⁸⁵ laying a theoretical foundation for literary analysis of later generations. Meanwhile, the attempt to separate the idea of the tragic from its dramatic form with respective proper names and definitions starts as early as from Plato, who “discussed tragedy without referring to any specific tragic drama [...], so that the tragic became an idea or a concept partially separate from Greek tragedy as a genre”.⁸⁶ Therefore, the semantic usage of “the tragic” has been given an independent existence almost from the very beginning of European critical tradition: “We would not generally speak of a poem as a tragedy, [...], though we might speak of one as embodying a tragic world-view.”⁸⁷

Also, European academics are fully aware of an interdisciplinary perspective in their study of tragedy, and the aesthetic/philosophical readings of tragedy remain one of the major topics to which theorists and critics constantly return. This trend has been enhanced in the late 18th century, when the notion of tragedy gradually expands into to the study of other literary genres in European critical discourse.⁸⁸ Starting from this period, some theorists and critics perceive “tragedy” in a more abstract and epistemological way, regarding it as “an idea attached to a specific form of drama performed at special times and places”⁸⁹ without rigidly confining it to any single literary form of expression. In this regard, by “[r]ecognizing that tragedy elaborated a synoptic vision of its own”, European scholars “essayed the idea of producing a

⁸⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S.H. Butcher (New Heaven: Orange Street Press Classics, 1998), 7.

⁸⁶ K.M. Newton, *Modern Literature and the Tragic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 1.

⁸⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 9.

⁸⁸ According to a few scholars such as K.M. Newton (K.M. Newton, *Modern Literature and the Tragic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 6.), Terry Eagleton (Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 21.), Alexa Huang (Alexander Huang, “The Tragic and the Chinese Subject,” *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs* 3, no. 1 (2003): 59-61.), and Yang Miaoping (Yang Miaoping, “Lüelun xifang beiju lilun xingtai de lishi yanjin” (On the historical development of Western theories of tragedy), *Zhongguo qingnian zhengzhi xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of China Youth University of Political Studies) 2 (2006): 139.), the rise of German Idealism at a time when the Western human civilisation entered the modern phase had provided some possibilities for the notion of tragedy to expand its influence into other literary domains.

⁸⁹ Adrian Poole, *Tragedy: A very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.

philosophical analogue of tragedy”⁹⁰ which, after decades of inheritance and development, has finally enabled the term “tragedy” to acquire certain aesthetic and philosophical implications from some new embodiments “in the collateral form of the novel”⁹¹ and other literary genres.

The acceptance of the concept of tragedy in Chinese literary discourse, on the other hand, has been far less systematic or well-developed. The initial attempt to construct the notion of tragedy in modern China was formulated in a very rough pattern under the drastic changes of socio-cultural background, when the new generation of Chinese intellectuals was overwhelmed by the influx of foreign terms and concepts. Meanwhile, the social and political crisis made it a pressing matter to introduce and incorporate “the vast quantity of new ideas and new information that suddenly became available when the doors to the West were opened”;⁹² so much so that most modern Chinese intellectuals chose to approach the new terms with an indiscriminate eagerness rather than trying to establish an adequate knowledge before borrowing them. Just as Lu Xun described, “the fearful thing about the Chinese literary scene is that everyone keeps introducing new terms without defining them.”⁹³ As a result, the conceptual and lexical confusions were unavoidable when those systematically developed and better defined foreign terms were swallowed in one breath into modern Chinese literary discourse.

The inflation of terminologies and concepts, according to later scholars, had saturated modern Chinese literary discussion with theoretical abstractions;⁹⁴ the

⁹⁰ Richard Eldridge, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 81.

⁹¹ Richard B Sewall, and Leonard W. Conversi, “Tragedy,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified 2016, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/art/tragedy-literature>.

⁹² Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 3.

⁹³ Lu Xun, “Bian” (The Tablet), first published in *Yusi* (Tattler) 4, no. 17 (1928), reprinted in *Lu Xun quanji, di si juan* (Complete works of Lu Xun, vol. 4) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1981), 88. English translation taken from Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (London: University of California Press, 1990), 1.

⁹⁴ Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 1.

usages of certain terms were made “even more befuddled because of over-definition”⁹⁵ under some vague and arbitrary terminological criteria. This pattern has left far-reaching effects on Chinese literary discourse formulated in the following decades, and thus ought to be directly responsible for the problematic usages of the term “tragedy” in current Chinese academia. Cao Wenxuan’s comment is illustrative on this point:

The development of the tradition of Western tragedy has been for long a self-conscious process; but the so-called Chinese tragedy gets its name, to a large degree, according to the need to search for the Chinese equivalence to the Western model. Although it is widely acknowledged that great differences do exist between these two, certain works are still defined as Chinese-style tragedies for the sake of highlighting their uniqueness. To borrow some concepts directly from others, or to modify the imported concepts according to our own needs without renaming them – this is exactly what we are good at. However, it never comes to our mind how strictly it is to define a concept in a given context.⁹⁶

The terminological confusion between “tragedy” and “the tragic” has aroused scholarly attention in current Chinese academia. Scholars are interpreting this matter from different perspectives: some explore the causal factors and some focus on the possible solutions. Alexa Huang (Huang Chengyuan)⁹⁷ considers the long-lasting debate on whether there is a Chinese tragedy to be caused by the inappropriate transplantation of this foreign concept into the Chinese critical context.⁹⁸ She advocates a clear distinction between “tragedy” and “the tragic” in Chinese literary criticism, holding that there is “a need for precise terminology in a cross-cultural definition of *the tragic*”,⁹⁹ as “the differentiation among certain key elements of a traditional genre” offers “creative inspiration as well as a more profound

⁹⁵ Luk, “Concept of Tragedy,” 15.

⁹⁶ Cao Wenxuan, *Ershi shiji mo Zhongguo wenxue xianxiang yanjiu* (The study of Chinese literary phenomena at the end of the 20th century) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2002), 18-19.

⁹⁷ Previously known as Alexander C. Huang.

⁹⁸ Huang Chengyuan (Alexa Huang), “Yi xuwu wei shiyou: Lu Xun yu xiandai Zhongguo wenxue de beiju yishi” (Taking substance out of nothingness: Lu Xun and the tragic consciousness of modern Chinese literature), *Lu Xun yanjiu yuekan* (Lu Xun research monthly) 10 (2003): 13, doi:10.3969/j.issn.1003-0638.2003.10.002.

⁹⁹ Alexander Huang (Alexa Huang), “The Tragic and the Chinese Subject,” *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs* 3, no. 1 (2003): 55.

understanding towards the genre itself”.¹⁰⁰ Liu Jialiang examines this matter from the perspective of comparative literary studies. He clearly identifies between different meanings of tragedy: “it should be noticed that there are two perspectives of reading tragedies – dramatically and aesthetically”.¹⁰¹ Liu believes that to simply argue about whether Chinese literature has ever nourished such a genre as tragedy does not make any sense; rather, a feasible way to approach this matter is to examine whether there are certain tragic senses in Chinese literature and how are they presented. In this respect, the distinction between “tragedy” and “the tragic” is necessary, because “those who negate the existence of a Chinese tragedy sometimes go further to negate the existence of tragic senses in Chinese literature”, which is mixing up the dramatic and aesthetic meanings of tragedy.¹⁰²

To Yun-tong Luk, “the multiplicity of meanings the term [tragedy] has inherited over the years, the diversity of plays to which the term has been variably applied, and the shift of focus in the discussion of the term from the formal-structural aspects to the thematico-philosophical ones”¹⁰³ have all complicated the meanings of tragedy in Euro-American context after centuries of development. Consequently, to simply borrow the “ready-made but diverse criteria of Western extraction” into Chinese literary discourse may largely be terminologically and methodologically problematic; instead, it is better to narrow down the definition of tragedy on “a less ambitious scale”, which is to define those expanded meanings separately and simply as implied by their literal implications.¹⁰⁴ Chen Qijia shares the same opinion in questioning the necessity to obstinately adhere to a word-for-word translation when using the term “tragedy” in all the domains of Chinese literary criticism. In order to illustrate this

¹⁰⁰ Huang, “Yi xuwu wei shiyu” (Taking substance out of nothingness), 13.

¹⁰¹ Liu Jialiang, “Dui Zhongguo youwu beiju de mingti bianxi” (The differentiation and analysis of the proposition “Whether China has tragedy”), *Shandong shehui kexue* (Shandong social science) 3 (2005): 47, doi:10.3969/j.issn.1003-4145.2005.03.008.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Luk, “Concept of Tragedy,” 15.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 16.

point, he first investigates how this term has been borrowed via the Japanese translation into the modern Chinese context, and concludes that the designation of “tragedy” as *higeki* in Japanese or as *beiju* in Chinese have actually been assigned with additional implications particular to their own cultural and aesthetic orientations – this is one crucial factor that made those terms differ greatly from their origins.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, Chen suggests a flexible application of the term “tragedy” in Chinese critical discourse according to the actual literary context it is related to: “it is meaningless to persist in searching for an almost one-to-one mapping between Western theories and Chinese literary works in order to assess the genuineness of the Chinese tragedy, because the notion of tragedy is itself developing in an open, dynamic process.”¹⁰⁶

Stated above, the separation between the dramatic and aesthetic/philosophical meanings of tragedy in Chinese critical discourse helps to resolve a series of conceptual confusions existing in current Chinese academia, which is a field that deserves intensive scholarly attention and effort. Admittedly, the definition of tragedy can be elusive in a way that it “floats ambiguously between the descriptive and the normative”¹⁰⁷ with hardly any definitive or inclusive attributes to locate it in a single category. This is especially the case when “the philosophical, religious, psychoanalytic and anthropological readings of tragedy”¹⁰⁸ keep emerging as new interpretative approaches and at the same time multiplying to a large degree the complexity of those meanings assigned to this term. Therefore, this study suggests to first establish a general frame for terminology, and then to set up respective working definitions of certain key terms and concepts according to the specific topics being discussed. It believes that to create a group of derivatives relating to different meanings of tragedy – such as tragic consciousness (*beiju yishi*), tragic notion (*beiju*

¹⁰⁵ Chen, “Beiju de mingming jiqi houguo” (The naming of tragedy and its aftermath), 182-188.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 187.

¹⁰⁷ Eagleton, *Idea of the Tragic*, 8.

¹⁰⁸ Rebecca Bushnell, ed., *A Companion to Tragedy* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 2.

guan), tragic sense (*beiju gan*), and the tragic (*beiju xing*) – and to properly define them in their contexts of discourse, would be a feasible method to reduce the potential risk of conceptual ambiguity when referring to certain tragic elements across genres.

1.3 CHOICE OF WORD: WHY *THE TRAGIC*?

To the Chinese appropriation of the concept of tragedy, it is nevertheless “hard to lay clear-cut lines between genres”,¹⁰⁹ especially when such a literary tradition is engaging with multiple meanings imported from a non-native literary and critical tradition. This study abstracts the idea of the tragic from its dramatic form when investigating the modern Chinese construction of a tragic tradition in both theory and practice, with the consideration of the particular literary, cultural, and social contexts of Republican China. The reason for this standpoint is two-fold: for one thing, the so-called “Chinese tragedy” still has a more or less contested nature in current Chinese academia, and to approach this matter from a non-dramatic perspective may provide some different or new understandings of this problem; for another, due to certain distinctive features of modern Chinese literature, it is more appropriate and feasible to examine the development of *the tragic* as a literary mode or aesthetic idea existing beyond the boundaries of genre in modern Chinese literary context.

To decide on a working terminology for further discussions, it is necessary to first locate this study in the research context of China-West comparative studies, because the introduction and development of the concept of tragedy in modern Chinese literary discourse is itself a product of constant literary and cultural exchange. It is noticeable that the distinctly different developing process of Chinese and Euro-American literary theories have produced different sets of vocabularies and critical discourses with intrinsic divergences; therefore, to establish a comparable category between these two scholarly traditions becomes one of the essential issues to face before going into detail to compare some particular terms or concepts.

¹⁰⁹ Huang, “The Tragic and the Chinese Subject,” 55.

This principle is related to the relationship between similarity and comparability in comparative studies. It can be especially tricky when certain derivative terms have occurred during the introduction process and thus complicated the comparison of a given concept with its origin. Sun Zhujin relates the confusion of comparability with similarity to some problems existing in the field of Chinese comparative literature, which have either over-emphasised the similarity between the two subjects without considering their individual differences, or matched indiscriminately the Chinese literary works with foreign terms at the expense of neglecting the comparability between them.¹¹⁰ It is the same case with the study of tragedy in current Chinese academia: as have been demonstrated above, some scholars are seeking for certain aesthetic similarities of *the tragic* to compare the so-called Chinese tragedy with its foreign counterparts, without being aware of the problems resulting from making comparisons at different discipline levels. Therefore, this study follows what Zhou Faxiang suggests, that is to concentrate on the development of *the tragic* as a literary or aesthetic idea in modern Chinese intellectual discourse, so that the examination of the Chinese appropriation of foreign theories can be restricted to a few key terms and concepts within a fixed academic discipline.¹¹¹

The reasons concern in the main three aspects: first, the development of modern Chinese theatre does not limit the literary practice of the tragedy only within the dramatic field, but instead sees an expansion of *the tragic* in other non-dramatic forms due to the adjustment of literary structure; second, there is a tendency in modern Chinese literary criticism to define tragedy according to its actual effects on the audience rather than to the forms of expression it takes, so that the tragic senses are in fact valued more than the tragic form; third, modern Chinese scholars have

¹¹⁰ Sun Zhujin (Cecile Chu-chin Sun), “Zhongxi bijiao wenxue yanjiu zhong de shijiao wenti” (Issues of perspective in Chinese-Western comparative literary studies), in *Zhongwai bijiao wenxue de lichen bei* (The landmark for Chinese and foreign comparative literature), ed. John Deeney, and Luo Gang (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1997), 68-74.

¹¹¹ Zhou Faxiang, *Xifang wenlun yu Zhongguo wenxue* (Western literary theory and Chinese literature) (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 1997), 53.

applied the term “tragedy” in a wide variety of domains almost from its initial appearance in Chinese intellectual discourse, thus making the appropriation of this concept a cross-genre and a multidisciplinary matter. These three aspects can be further explained as follows:

Firstly, the introduction of the concept of tragedy into modern Chinese literature was an essential part of the drama movement at the beginning of the 20th century, originally aiming to achieve a complete revolution in the dramatic field by borrowing from foreign literature some terms and concepts entirely new to the Chinese literary tradition. Modern Chinese drama modelled after its foreign examples possessed obvious differences from the traditional plays;¹¹² it gained a rapid popularity among a great number of new-born dramatic societies during the May Fourth and New Culture Movement, because of its advantages of expressing strong, timely concerns over prevailing social and political issues. A new type of spoken drama (*huaju*) took shape subsequently and remained significant during the Anti-Japanese War. The creation of tragedy occupied a considerable proportion of theatrical production during this process; some influential playwrights such as Tian Han, Hong Shen, Cao Yu, and Guo Moruo all devoted great efforts to incorporate this imported genre into their respective dramatic practices, helping it gradually to establish itself in modern Chinese literature.

However, some other literary forms also engaged actively with the experiment and presentation of tragic senses in the meantime, among which fiction played an important role. This was mainly due to the literary reform started in the early 20th century, when the status of fiction was raised from a very low position in traditional Chinese literature to become instantly “the most exciting of literary phenomena”.¹¹³ The promotion of fiction in modern Chinese literature echoed the trend to “replace

¹¹² See more discussions on this in David Der-wei Wang, “Chinese Literature from 1841 to 1937,” in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, vol. 2, eds. Kang-i Sun Chang, and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 486.

¹¹³ Wang, “Chinese Literature from 1841 to 1937,” 442.

the old tradition with the new one” (*chujiu buxin*), as it advocated the use of vernacular (*baihua*) as a new linguistic system for literary creativity and later as the authoritative language “central in the development of modern Chinese literature”.¹¹⁴ Under such circumstances, modern Chinese writers were more than happy to try their hands at involving *the tragic* with the vernacular fiction for an overall transformation in the literary field. As a result, while the creation of fiction continued to boom throughout the entire modern era, the distinct tragic senses were palpable in some novels and short stories written by Lu Xun, Yu Dafu, Ba Jin, Mao Dun, and Lao She in the Republican period, which this study will also include in the discussions.

Secondly, modern Chinese tragic discourse was not rooted in a well-established stylistic tradition from the very beginning; as a result, modern intellectuals tended to define tragedy according to the tragic implications or effects, rather than to the form of expression they took. This tradition could be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century, when Wang Guowei¹¹⁵ expressed an explicit concern with the aesthetic idea of the tragic and its application to the assessment of traditional Chinese literature. Wang referred to *Honglou meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber)¹¹⁶ as “a complete tragedy”, because it presented “not a poetic justice” but “an immanent justice existing beyond the earthly world and human life”.¹¹⁷ Referencing Schopenhauer’s theory of tragedy, Wang regarded the essence of *the tragic* in *Honglou meng* as “the ordinary men driven by certain unforeseen incidents out of

¹¹⁴ Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, “The Origins of Modern Chinese Literature,” in *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*, ed. Merle Goldman (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977), 35.

¹¹⁵ Wang Guowei (1877-1927), scholar, literary historian and poet at the turn of the pre-modern and modern period of Chinese history; especially known for his contribution to the introduction of Western thought into modern Chinese intellectual field, was considered to be one of the first several scholars to discuss in detail the concept of tragedy. See Wang Ban, *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China* (California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 63.

¹¹⁶ A novel written by Cao Xueqin (1715-1763) in Qing dynasty.

¹¹⁷ Wang Guowei, “*Honglou meng pinglun*” (Comments on Dream of the Red Chamber), first published in *Jiaoyu shijie* (World of education) 76-78, 80-81 (1904), reprinted in *Zhongguo wenlun xuan, jindai juan, xia* (Selection of Chinese literary essays, modern volume, Part 2), eds. Wu Guoping, and Huang Lin (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1996), 476.

their control”, thus “no one could be blamed for doing evil although everyone is responsible for others’ misfortunes”.¹¹⁸ The “revealing of the truth of life as well as the impossibility to extricate from it” was considered by Wang as “the ultimate aesthetic value” that made *Honglou meng* “the tragedy of tragedies” (*beiju zhong zhi beiju*).¹¹⁹ Apparently, Wang “conceive[d] tragedy as a tragic vision rather than a dramatic form”;¹²⁰ he used the term “tragedy” in his analysis of the Chinese novel, defined “tragedy” according to certain tragic senses or moods, which clearly separated *the tragic* from its dramatic genre.

This emphasis upon the tragic effects remained observable in the May Fourth and New Culture period, when the prevailing literary view associated *the tragic* to the faithful presentation of life’s miseries. As a result, for some Chinese intellectuals at this time, the decisive features of tragedy were based not on the genre but on such emotions as grief, lamentation, or indignation which those tragic works could arouse among the audience. Following the success and popularity of the tragic plays written by Cao Yu and Guo Moruo in the 1930s and 1940s, *the tragic* became more frequently discussed with its dramatic form for a time, but the majority of contemporary critics still did not try to bind these two together, and *the tragic* as an aesthetic idea still had a place in both theoretical discussions and literary practice.

Thirdly, as stated above, the Chinese introduction of the concept of tragedy is far beyond a single literary concern. Constantly driven by the pressing social and political crisis, modern Chinese scholars put tragedy on the frontline of the socio-cultural revolution, and applied this notion into a variety of intellectual domains. Among the first several intellectuals to bring the term “tragedy” into the Chinese literary context, Jiang Guanyun¹²¹ represented a typical perspective in

¹¹⁸ Wang, “*Honglou meng pinglun*” (Comments on Dream of the Red Chamber), 477.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 479.

¹²⁰ Wang Ban, *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China* (California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 64.

¹²¹ Jiang Guanyun (1865-1929), also known as Jiang Zhiyou. Late-Qing and pre-modern Chinese poet; advocate of political reform and constitutional monarchy, participated in the poetic revolution in the 1890s.

instrumentalising the concept of tragedy for a pragmatic purpose. According to Jiang, tragedy “enlightens the public with high ambition and profound thinking”, so that it “benefits society” by “cultivating human souls”.¹²² Rather than discussing in detail the definition and artistic features of tragedy, Jiang concentrated more on its constructive function in social change, which was obviously no longer a literary concern.

Later in the May Fourth and New Culture Movement, a group of scholars such as Hu Shi, Fu Sinian, Zheng Zhenduo, and Lu Xun used tragedy to attack the existing literary tradition as well as to dissect the national character (*guomin xing*), enabled this term, again, with certain ideological dimensions. This pragmatic viewpoint remained influential in the 1930s and 1940s, as the connection between literature and politics was gradually strengthened and offered tragedy an extensive intellectual ground for development in the fields of socio-culture and political campaign. Therefore, it is more appropriate to examine *the tragic* as a typical concept or motif in the critical discourse of Republican China, because modern Chinese intellectuals assigned to this idea multiple tasks through their various interpretations, making the acceptance of it to a certain extent the epitome of the Chinese response to the influx of foreign theories and terms – not only in literature, but also in culture, politics and social ideology.

In conclusion, based on those reasons discussed above, this study advocates a conceptual and lexical separation between “tragedy” and “the tragic”, and therefore focuses on the modern Chinese interpretation and appropriation of the term “tragedy” as a literary idea or mode rather than a literary genre. Admittedly, the absolute separation between the dramatic and aesthetic meanings of tragedy is somewhat

¹²² Jiang Guanyun (Jiang Zhiyou), “Zhongguo zhi yanju jie” (On Chinese theater), first published in *Xinmin congbao* (New citizen journal) 3, no. 17 (1904), reprinted in *Zhongguo wenlun xuan, jindai juan, xia* (Selection of Chinese literary essays, modern volume, Part 2), eds. Wu Guoping, and Huang Lin (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1996), 90-94.

impossible, as they keep “pois[ing] ambiguously between science and ideology”¹²³ in scholarly research. In this case, “tragedy” and “the tragic” may continue to “sustain an indistinct relationship to one another”;¹²⁴ and this will therefore remain as one of those unsettled issues frequently returned to by related academic discussions. However, the attempt to present the predicament of the current research and to explore the core of the problem through concentrating on the clarification of some key terminologies is nevertheless important; for it at least helps to approach the subject from a fundamental perspective with possible solutions to the problem.

¹²³ Eagleton, *Idea of the Tragic*, 19.

¹²⁴ Storm, *Theory of the Tragic*, 28-29.

II The 1920s: The New Culture Movement and Its Legacy (1917-1927)

The May Fourth Movement is a seminal event in the history of modern Chinese literature. Well-established in many aspects as the “magical beginning of Chinese modernity”,¹²⁵ this movement embodies several implications: narrowly speaking, it is a patriotic political campaign against the government’s humiliating foreign policies; meanwhile, this term, in its broad sense, also refers to a series of revolutions in the field of traditional ethics, political and social institutions, ideological trends, as well as literature and arts, signifying “an attempt to redefine China’s culture as a valid part of the modern world”.¹²⁶

The current academia has different opinions in defining the exact time period of the so-called “May Fourth Literature”.¹²⁷ Considering the somewhat contested

¹²⁵ Wang, “Chinese Literature from 1841 to 1937,” 467.

¹²⁶ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1991), 312.

¹²⁷ It is in particular obvious among Euro-American scholars who concern with the definition of the broad sense of the term “May Fourth Literature”. For example, Kirk Denton suggests a period between 1915 and 1925 (Kirk A. Denton, *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature 1893-1945* (California: Stanford University Press, 1996), 114.), Chow Tse-tsung is in favour of a time span from 1917 to 1921 (Tse-tsung Chow, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 6.), while Ellen Widmer would expand this scope from 1918 to 1930 (Ellen Widmer, “Preface,” in *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China*, eds. Ellen Widmer, and David Der-wei Wang (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), ix.), which is similar to Milena Doleželová-Velingerová and her colleagues in defining this period between the 1910s and 1930s (Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, Oldřich Král, and Graham Martin Sanders, eds., “Introduction,” in *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: China’s May Fourth Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1.). There are also scholars like C.T. Hsia (Chih-tsing Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1961).) and Leo Ou-fan Lee (Leo Ou-Fan Lee, “Literary Trends I: the Quest for Modernity, 1895–1927,” in *The Cambridge History of China Volume 12: Republican China, 1912–1949, Part 1*, ed. J.K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 464.) who place their discussions of the May Fourth period in modern Chinese literary history between 1917 and 1927; but they have not provided further explanations for their periodisation.

However, the opinions do not vary very much among Chinese scholars. Apart from *Zhongguo Wusi wenxue shi* (History of the May Fourth Chinese literature) (Zhu Defa (Jinan: Shandong wenyi chubanshe, 1986), 87.) which clearly identifies the time span of “May Fourth Literature” as running from 1917 to 1921, other standard literary histories such as *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshi nian* (Three decades in modern Chinese literature) (Qian Liqun, Wen Rumin, and Wu Fuhui, eds. (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998).), *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue*

nature of this topic, this study prefers not to term the first ten years in the history of modern Chinese literature as the “May Fourth period”, but instead expands the discussion in a broader context of the “New Culture period”, which contains certain main literary currents and some follow-up trends spreading over the years from 1910s to 1920s. The reason for this is to highlight the cultural and ideological attributes of the new thinking emerged during this period, which may not necessarily follow the periodisation set by political events.

As a literary and intellectual revolution, the New Culture Movement sees some important events in the history of modern Chinese literature, such as the publication of the journal *Qingnian zazhi* (Youth magazine)¹²⁸ in 1915; the proclamation of the coming of literary revolution by Chen Duxiu in 1917;¹²⁹ the debate and conclusion of the polemics on science and metaphysics in 1923;¹³⁰ the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925;¹³¹ and the beginning of the discussion and promotion of a “revolutionary literature” in 1927.¹³² This study values two events for time division in the development of the literary discourse on tragedy: the beginning of the literary revolution in 1917, when “tragedy” as a new term began to frequently appear in literary debates; the formation of a proletarian agenda in 1927, which signified a change of the main theme in literary circles and thus distinguished the New Culture

shi 1917-2000 (History of modern Chinese literature 1917-2000) (Zhu Donglin, ed. (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2007).), and *Ershi shiji Zhongguo wenxue shi* (History of 20th-century Chinese literature) (Zhu Donglin, Ding Fan, and Zhu Xiaojin, eds. (Taipei: Wenshizhe chubanshe, 2000).) all designate the May Fourth period in modern Chinese literature within a ten-year’ timespan from 1917 to 1927.

¹²⁸ Later renamed as *Xin qingnian* (New youth)

¹²⁹ See Chen Duxiu, “Wenxue geming lun” (On literary revolution), *Xin qingnian* (New youth) 2, no. 6 (1917): 6-9.

¹³⁰ Ho Kan-chih claims it as the end of the May Fourth Movement. See Kan-chih Ho, *History of the Chinese Enlightenment*, 1947, 151.

¹³¹ According to Kirk Denton, this incident marked the Marxist turn for many intellectuals in the late 1920s. See Kirk A. Denton, ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature 1893-1945* (California: Stanford University Press, 1996), 114.

¹³² Jerome B. Grieder regards this year as the end of the New Culture Movement also because of the establishment of the Nanjing National Government. See Jerome B. Grieder, *Intellectuals and the State in Modern China* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 236.

interpretation of the concept of tragedy from later periods.

2.1 THORETICAL DISCUSSION: TRAGEDY AND THE COUNTER-TRADITIONAL AGENDA

The modern Chinese introduction of the term “tragedy” can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century, when several enlightened intellectuals of the late Qing period started in newspaper columns to demonstrate respectively a preliminary knowledge about tragedy as a new form of literature and as a philosophical aesthetic concept. This tendency was greatly enhanced by the New Culture Movement in the late 1910s. This nationwide intellectual campaign played an important role in shaping the orientation and standpoint of modern Chinese literature, in that a counter-traditional discourse emerged during this time, featured a complete rejection of the existing literary tradition as well as an intensive introduction of foreign literary ideas and themes. As a result, the concept of tragedy, which was entirely alien to Chinese literature, became a heated topic among modern Chinese intelligentsia. New Culture scholars compared between traditional Chinese operatic drama and European tragedy in terms of the differences – usually followed by the detestation of the former’s backwardness in contrast to the latter’s superiority as claimed – they revealed, in order to advocate a thorough reformation not only in theatrical circles but also in the whole literary field.

2.1.1 The Rejection of Chinese Tragedy

The discussion of the term “tragedy” in the New Culture period started from the rejection of Chinese tragedy. This opinion reflected the negative attitude of the new generation of intellectuals towards the perceived Chinese literary tradition, indicating their motivation and purpose for introducing the concept of tragedy at this critical time as part of the literary revolution. The *Datanyuan jieju* (happy-reunion ending), which was popular in traditional Chinese literature, received fierce criticism for its deliberate pursuit of poetic justice; a majority of New Culture intellectuals

considered it highly hypocritical and thus devalued Chinese literature.

The critique on the *Datanyuan* in the New Culture period first of all concerned with the authenticity of literature. Hu Shi,¹³³ for example, considered the *Datanyuan* as “vestiges or rudiments” left by traditional Chinese theatre, which prevented it from being completely renovated.¹³⁴ To him, what the Chinese literature lacked most was “a concept of tragedy” (*beiju de guannian*),¹³⁵ as “happy reunion” was such a popular theme in either the fiction or the drama:

The writer knows very well that the world is either upside down or full of separation and death, yet he still wants to place every affectionate couple in marriage. He still insists that evil and good are as clear-cut as black and white, that retribution against evil is fair and balanced. He turns a blind eye to tragic dramas under Heaven, refuses to honestly describe the brutalities and irrationalities of the ways of the world. He only wants to express all-around satisfaction and joy on paper. This is a literature of deception.¹³⁶

Here, Hu emphasised on literature’s faithful portrayal of life. This perspective justified his disdain for the *Datanyuan*, which was “never able to leave the audience with any profound feelings or fundamental consciousness of reflection, except for a sense of illusive satisfaction”.¹³⁷ Hu’s assessment of Gao E’s supplemented version of *Honglou meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber) clearly expressed this attitude. To him, this piece was “admirable”, because the ending with Daiyu’s death and Baoyu’s conversion to Buddhism broke the fetish of the happy reunion in Chinese novel: “we

¹³³ Hu Shi (1891-1962), one of the pioneering and influential figures in the New Culture Movement. He was well-acknowledged for his contribution to the establishment of the new literature and the written vernacular language system in modern Chinese literary history. He was also considered the first to touch upon the subject of literary revolution. See Cai Yuanpei, “Zongxu” (General preface), in *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi: jianshe lilun ji* (Compendium of Chinese new literature: Volume on theoretical development), ed. Hu Shi (Shanghai: Liangyou tushu yinshua gongsi, 1935), 9; and Leo Ou-Fan Lee, “Literary trends I: the Quest for Modernity, 1895–1927,” in *The Cambridge History of China Volume 12: Republican China, 1912–1949, Part 1*, ed. J.K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 464.

¹³⁴ Hu, “Wenxue jinhua guannian yu xiju gailiang” (The concept of literary evolution and the theatre reform), 381.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 382.

¹³⁶ Ibid. English translation taken from Wang Ban, *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China* (California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 70.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 383.

should not only admire but also thank him [Gao E] for his supplemented version which [...] surpasses all the other versions of happy reunion and preserves for Chinese literature a tragic novel!”¹³⁸

Fu Sinian,¹³⁹ similarly, expressed a strong contempt for the *Datanyuan*: “The exquisiteness of drama lies in the lingering impressions it leaves the audience with; however, to intentionally make up a happy ending eliminates those feelings and sentiments. The best drama ends with no solution, or unhappily – this is both touching and thought-provoking.”¹⁴⁰

Meanwhile, there were some other opinions more concerned with the literary nature of the *Datanyuan*. Zheng Zhenduo¹⁴¹ claimed those Chinese dramas “begin with ‘talented scholars and lovely ladies’ [*caizi jiaren*] and end with ‘being granted a title of the nobility and happy reunion’ [*rongfeng tuanyuan*]” lacking any ideological or artistic value to be ranked among modern theatres: “dramas of this type go against the spirit of the times and are thus not worth staging.”¹⁴² Guo Moruo¹⁴³ despised those sequels to *Shuihu zhuan* (Water Margin)¹⁴⁴, *Xixiang ji* (Romance of the West

¹³⁸ Hu Shi, “*Honglou meng kaozheng* (gaiding gao)” (Revised version of “Investigation of Dream of the Red Chamber”), in *Hu Shi wencun, juan san* (Collected essays of Hu Shi, vol. 3) (Shanghai: Yadong tushuguan, 1928), 249.

¹³⁹ Fu Sinian (1896-1950), historian, linguist, and educator; one of the leading figures in the May Fourth and New Culture Movement due to his active promotion of Western thought during this period.

¹⁴⁰ Fu, “*Lun bianzhi juben*” (On the written principles of script), 390.

¹⁴¹ Zheng Zhenduo (1889-1958), author, literary critic, and historian, who contributed significantly to the establishment of new literature during the periods of the New Culture Movement and the literary revolution. He was once the chief editor of *Xiaoshuo yuebao* (Fiction monthly) and founder of *Wenxue yanjiu hui* (Literary Association), advocating a slogan of “literature for life” (*wei rensheng*).

¹⁴² Zheng Zhenduo, “*Guangming yundong de kaishi*” (The beginning of the movement of enlightenment), first published in *Xiju* (Drama) 1, no. 3 (1921), reprinted in *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi: wenxue lunzheng ji* (Compendium of Chinese new literature: Volume on literary debates), ed. Zheng Zhen duo (Shanghai: Liangyou tushu yinshua gongsi, 1935), 422-423.

¹⁴³ Guo Moruo (1892-1978), poet, historian, archaeologist, one of the leading writers in 20th Chinese literature; especially well-known for his contribution to several aspects in modern and contemporary Chinese academic traditions. His well-established works were collections of poems such as *Nüshen* (Goddess, 1921), *Xingkong* (Star skies, 1923), and history plays such as *Quyuan* (Quyuan, 1942), and *Hufu* (The tiger tally, 1942).

¹⁴⁴ A novel written by Shi Nai'an (1296-1370) in the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties.

Chamber)¹⁴⁵, and *Honglou meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber), in which the contrived happy endings were illustrative of “the superficialities of pitiful boring authors” who made “wretched and useless sequels to fine works”.¹⁴⁶ Ouyang Yuqian¹⁴⁷ questioned in particular the artistic value of the *Chuanqi* (literally, transmission of the strange)¹⁴⁸ in traditional Chinese literature. To him, this literary tradition mechanically combined several pieces of stories with happy endings, so that “the happy reunion often appears to be unnatural and constrainedly made up”.¹⁴⁹ These statements mentioned certain examples from classical Chinese literature to back up their critiques of the *Datanyuan*, and were thus more concrete compared to the assertions of Hu Shi and Fu Sinian.

A third perspective associated the *Datanyuan* complex with the Chinese national character (*guomin xing*) as being escapist and self-delusive. Lu Xun¹⁵⁰ held that the Chinese were addicted to the literary mode of the happy reunion, because they were unwilling to reveal life’s imperfectness and seek for possible solutions. To him, Chinese fiction was deceptive in a way that “it compensates for all the imperfect

¹⁴⁵ A five-acts play written by Wang Shifu (1234-1294) in Yuan dynasty.

¹⁴⁶ Guo Moruo, “*Shaonian weite zhi fannao xuyin*” (Introduction to The Sorrows of Young Werther), first published in *Chuangzao jikan* (Creation quarterly) 1, no. 1 (1922), reprinted in *Ershi shiji Zhongguo xiaoshuo lilun ziliao, di er juan (1917-1927)* (Theoretical materials on Chinese fiction in the 20th century, vol. 2, 1917-1927), ed. Yan Jiayan (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1997), 210.

¹⁴⁷ Ouyang Yuqian (1889-1962), playwright, Peking opera actor and film director. He devoted much of his career to the discussions and practices of theatrical creativity, and was considered one of the three founders of modern Chinese spoken drama (*huaju*). See Chen Xiaomei, “Introduction,” in *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 4.

¹⁴⁸ Originally a literary form of short story written in classical Chinese; later acquired an operatic form.

¹⁴⁹ Ouyang Yuqian, “*Xiju gaige zhi lilun yu shiji*” (Theory and practice of drama reform), first published in *Xiju* (Drama) 1, no. 1 (1929), reprinted in *Ouyang Yuqian quanji, di si juan* (Complete works of Ouyang Yuqian, vol. 4) (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1990), 47.

¹⁵⁰ Lu Xun (1881-1939), penname of Zhou Shuren. Short story writer, essayist, literary critic, poet, and translator; a leading figure of modern Chinese literature as well as of the intellectual field. He was mostly renowned for his contribution to the establishment of a modern Chinese literary tradition, both in a linguistic system and the application of Western terms and techniques. Some of his influential works were short story collections *Nahan* (Call to Arms, 1923), *Panghuang* (Wandering, 1925), *Ye Cao* (Wild Grass, 1927), and *Gushi xinbian* (Old Tales Retold, 1935) as well as series of collections of essays and poems.

nature in history when those looking for retribution receive their judgements”,¹⁵¹ which was “indeed a matter of national character”.¹⁵² In this regard, Lu referred to Chinese literature as “a literature of concealment and deceit”¹⁵³ produced by those who were always too cowardly to look life straight in the face. This opinion shared a similar standpoint with that of Hu Shi, which attributed the deceptiveness of Chinese literature¹⁵⁴ to people’s unwillingness to open their eyes to the reality of the world.¹⁵⁵ Here, neither Lu Xun nor Hu Shi related their negative assessments of the *Datanyuan* directly to the absence of Chinese tragedy, but instead used this example to argue for literary reform from an ideological point of view.

Apart from concentrating on the *Datanyuan*, the critique of Chinese tragedy in the 1920s also included some other opinions. Xu Zhimo,¹⁵⁶ for example, observed a “shallow prejudice” (*qianlou de chengjian*) of the Chinese towards “arts of genuine greatness”. To him, the Chinese had been oppressed by feudal ethics for a long time, and therefore had lost their vitality for life as well as the ability to realise the profundity of human nature. As a result, “a nation like this can never understand the significance and value of tragedy”.¹⁵⁷ (Here Xu mainly referred to the

¹⁵¹ Lu Xun, “Zhongguo xiaoshuo de lishi bianqian” (The historical changes in Chinese fiction), in *Lu Xun quanji, di jiu juan* (Complete works of Lu Xun, vol. 9) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 326.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Lu Xun, “Lun zheng le yan kan” (On looking facts in the face), first published in *Fen* (The grave) (Beijing: Weiming she, 1927), reprinted in *Lu Xun quanji, di yi juan* (Complete works of Lu Xun, vol. 1) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 254-255. English translation taken from Feng Jin, *The New Woman in Early Twentieth-century Chinese Fiction* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2004), 40.

¹⁵⁴ Hu, “Wenxue jinhua guannian yu xiju gailiang” (The concept of literary evolution and the theatre reform), 382.

¹⁵⁵ Hu Shi, “Yibusheng zhuyi” (Ibsenism), first published in *Xin qingnian* (New youth) 4, no. 6 (1918), reprinted in *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi: jianshe lilun ji* (Compendium of Chinese new literature: Volume on theoretical development), ed. Hu Shi (Shanghai: Liangyou tushu yinshua gongsi, 1935), 180.

¹⁵⁶ Xu Zhimo (1897-1931), poet and essayist in early 20th century Chinese literature. Possessing a distinctive style of romanticism, he is recognised as one of the representing figures of the Crescent School (*Xinyue pai*) influential in the 1920s. See Chapter 9 in *Literary Societies of Republican China*, eds. Kirk A. Denton, and Michel Hockx (New York: Lexington Books, 2008), 279-312.

¹⁵⁷ Xu Zhimo, “Kanle *Hei jiangjun* yihou” (After seeing the play *Othello*), first published in *Chenbao fukan* (Literary supplement to the Morning post), April 11-14, 1923, reprinted in *Xu Zhimo quanji, di yi juan: san wen*

Shakespearean tragedies, as he commented in the following passages on the film adaptation of *Othello*.)

Generally speaking, the rejection of Chinese tragedy to a certain extent distinguished the New Culture intellectuals from their late Qing predecessors, in terms of an attitude more resolute to negate rather than to renovate the existing literary tradition. Being part of the literary agenda to promote a new literature that served the purpose of social and ideological transformation, the New Culture discourse on tragedy was from the beginning included in a counter-traditional project, thus largely in accordance with the main theme of literature at this time.

2.1.2 The Conceptualisation of Tragedy

The critique on the *Datanyuan* was not the sole element in the intellectual discussion of tragedy in the New Cultural Movement. Alongside the declaration that “China has no tragedy”, some scholars also provided their own understandings towards certain defining elements of tragedy. These discussions generally centred on the following aspects: the function of tragedy, the distinction between tragedy and mere sadness, tragic conflict, and tragedy’s subject matter.

Hu Shi perceived the concept of tragedy from three aspects:

The concept of tragedy [can be understood this way]: firstly, to acknowledge that the deepest human emotion is hidden in those moments of grief, frustration, or helplessness rather than moments of joy and delight; secondly, to acknowledge that people are likely to integrate their individual feelings such as pain and joy into a collective sympathy with others upon witnessing them being caught in miserable circumstances; thirdly, to acknowledge that extreme sadness and predicaments are commonplace for human existence in history – they can be caused by either unpredictable fate (which is the most common perception for Greek tragedy), or the social immoralities that degraded people into the abyss of evil (which is the most common perception for modern tragedy). It is this third aspect in the concept of tragedy that can touch and awaken people with a variety of thought-provoking implications.¹⁵⁸

yi (Complete works of Xu Zhimo, vol. 1: first collection of prose), ed. Han Shishan (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2005), 239.

¹⁵⁸ Hu, “Wenxue jinhua guannian yu xiju gailiang” (The concept of literary evolution and the theatre reform), 383.

Hu's interpretation touched upon such factors as the tragic mood of grief and distress, the capability of tragedy to make people empathise with the characters, the universality of tragic predicament for human existence, and the profound emotional effect tragedy leaves on the audience. The main focus was on the function of tragedy to enlighten and to teach, so that it became "an absolutely sacred medicine to cure our lying, hypocritical, and shallow literature".¹⁵⁹

Lu Yin,¹⁶⁰ similarly, claimed that the tone of tragedy was "mostly grievous and miserable". To her, "human beings throughout the world, both the nobilities and the common people, are totally unaware of those tragic things"; therefore, works of this type can "easily invoke touching and thought-provoking effects".¹⁶¹ She also mentioned the obligation of the playwright and his works, suggesting that modern Chinese theatre should shoulder the responsibility of "seeking a way out from the miseries": "For playwrights, this kind of social tragedy ought to be presented with sorrow and passionate sympathy. It is on the one hand to make those suffering in pain feel great release and consolation, and on the other hand to awaken in them the self-consciousness to strive for the light in the darkness. To uplift the joy of life is the duty of the playwrights."¹⁶² Sharing with Hu Shi a similar functional viewpoint, Lu Yin valued the constructive role of tragedy in its encouraging and uplifting utility to the people.

Meanwhile, some intellectuals attempted to separate tragedy from mere sadness

¹⁵⁹ Hu, "Wenxue jinhua guannian yu xiju gailiang" (The concept of literary evolution and the theatre reform), 383. English translation taken from Kirk A. Denton, ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature 1893-1945* (California: Stanford University Press, 1996), 10.

¹⁶⁰ Lu Yin (1898-1934), penname of Huang Shuyi, also known as Huang Ying. One of the major female writers in the May Fourth and New Culture Movement, most celebrated for her sentimental literary style; authored fiction collections of *Haibin guren* (Old acquaintances on the seashore, 1925), *Man Li* (Man Li, 1927), and some other fictions and essays.

¹⁶¹ Lu Yin, "Chuangzuo de wojian" (My views on literary creation), first published in *Xiaoshuo yuebao* (Short stories monthly) 12, no. 7 (1921), reprinted in *Ershi shiji Zhongguo xiaoshuo lilun ziliao, di er juan (1917-1927)* (Theoretical materials on Chinese fiction in the 20th century, vol. 2, 1917-1927), ed. Yan Jiayan (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1997), 188.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 189.

in everyday life. Xu Zhimo, by proposing a distinction between different meanings of tragedy, declared that such literary scenes like the separation between lovers, the death of all the characters on stage, the sadness upon seeing one's wife and children being captured by bandits, or the miserable experience caused by the lifelong failure in the imperial examination, could be more or less considered as having some tragic sentiments; however, "artistically they were by no means tragedies".¹⁶³ Bing Xin¹⁶⁴ referred to the same problem: "Nowadays people often speak of 'tragedy' without being aware of the differences between tragedy [*beiju*] and mere sadness [*canju*], so that there are always many misuses of these terms."¹⁶⁵ Xiong Foxi¹⁶⁶ disagreed to consider such daily experience as the life circle of birth, aging, illness, and death (*sheng lao bing si*) as the "tragedy of life" (*rensheng beiju*), because "it is indeed rather mere sadness [*bei*] than having any literariness or dramatic attributes [*ju*]". Instead, he held that the genuine tragedy should be "certain circumstances that make one linger between the life and death dilemma".¹⁶⁷

This concern went hand in hand with the discussions of tragic conflict, which the intellectuals all used to differentiate between tragedy and mere sadness. Bing Xin emphasised greatly that "the power originated from the protagonists' spiritual

¹⁶³ Xu, "Kanle *Hei jiangjun* yihou" (After seeing the play *Othello*), 238.

¹⁶⁴ Bing Xin (1900-1999), penname of Xie Wanying. Poet, essayist, translator; one of the major female writers in 20th century Chinese literature. Most celebrated for her series of works written for young readers and contribution to the development of modern Chinese children's literature. Major works are poem collections *Fanxing* (A myriad of stars, 1923), *Chunshui* (Spring water, 1923), and essay collection *Ji xiao duzhe* (To young readers, 1926).

¹⁶⁵ Bing Xin, "Zhongxi xiju zhi bijiao" (The comparison between Chinese and Western drama), first published in *Chenbao fukan* (Literary supplement to the Morning post), November 18, 1926, reprinted in *Bingxin quanji, di er juan* (Complete works of Bing Xin, vol. 2), ed. Zhuo Ru (Fuzhou: Haixia wenyi chubanshe, 1994), 327.

¹⁶⁶ Xiong Foxi (1900-1965), playwright, educator, and practitioner of modern Chinese drama; well-acknowledged for his fundamental contribution to the development of spoken drama (*huaaju*) in modern Chinese literature through rural drama experiments and volumes of theoretical discussions.

¹⁶⁷ Xiong Foxi, "Women xianzai de da beiju" (The grand tragedy in our times), first published in *Chenbao fukan* (Literary supplement to the Morning post), October 21, 1926, reprinted in *Minguo mingbao xiezheng* (Selection of influential newspapers in republican China), eds. Chen Chun, and Pei Ying (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1998), 13.

conflicts” was the “driving force” (*fadong li*) of tragedy, because what mere sadness lacked was exactly “the conflicts of minds and souls” (*xinling de chongtu*).¹⁶⁸ To Xu Zhimo, the artistic essence of tragedy that made it stand out from the commonplace tragic events lay in the faithful recording and transforming of human beings’ inner conflicts into dramas:

The genuine tragedy is the artistic expression of conflicts and paradoxes in the nature of life. Its source materials come from the confrontations between the soul and the body, the ideal and the reality, the inborn free will and the endowed responsibility, the sober intelligence and the passionate impulse, the human will and the Fate. [...] The stage for the genuine tragedy is not only the external world where the truth can be traced, but also should be the human soul where the deep and bottomless internal world is bitten, burnt, torn apart, and destroyed.¹⁶⁹

Xiong Foxi, on the other hand, based his understanding of tragic conflict on the Aristotelian definition of tragedy:

In regard to the theory of drama, tragedy was defined according to the confrontation of human will, or the inner conflicts and struggles of certain matter. As Aristotle puts it: “tragedy is an imitation of action.” Here I assume that this “action” refers definitely not to those behaviours or movements we commonly see in dramas, but to the so-called “conflicts” in modern theoretical criticism concerning the confrontation of will, which takes place both in the inner world of oneself and among several individuals.¹⁷⁰

The involvement of “conflicts” as a central theme and distinguishing feature of tragedy was a new aspect in the understanding of the concept of tragedy in the 1920s. Through exploring into the internal mentality of the tragic characters, this perspective provided an aesthetic reading of tragedy, thus distanced itself from other contemporaries’ focus on the sociocultural aspects.

New Cultural intellectuals discussed the subject matter of tragedy from different perspectives. Bing Xin suggested that the tragic character should be portrayed as a hero (*yingxiong*) rather than a small man (*xiao renwu*), because the latter “can only make calamity out of tragic events due to his lack of a strong individual free will”.¹⁷¹ Here, she introduced a new concept as “free will” (*ziyou yizhi*), and connected it with

¹⁶⁸ Bing, “Zhongxi xiju zhi bijiao” (The comparison between Chinese and Western drama), 327.

¹⁶⁹ Xu, “Kanle *Hei jiangjun* yihou” (After seeing the play *Othello*), 238-239.

¹⁷⁰ Xiong, “Women xianzai de da beiju” (The grand tragedy in our times), 12-13.

¹⁷¹ Bing, “Zhongxi xiju zhi bijiao” (The comparison between Chinese and Western drama), 330.

the birth of tragedy in terms of its contribution to cultivate people's self-awareness or sense of individuality awakened by the May Fourth Movement: "the knowledge of oneself" was "the beginning of all tragedies", because by "understanding themselves they [the ordinary people] can have the free will and desire for advancement to strive for freedom."¹⁷² In this sense, Bing Xin encouraged the public to "be the heroes of tragedies", as "it is exactly what we need nowadays in China".¹⁷³

Lu Xun, with his famous statement that "tragedy shows how what is worthwhile in life is shattered",¹⁷⁴ again brought this issue into the domain of cultural ideology. He sharply criticised the Chinese obsession with the deliberately-made perfection, contrasting it with tragedy which had a "destructive power" (*pohuai xing*) of all the whitewashed realities. Therefore, he held that China would neither have a dramatist of tragedy or comedy nor a satirist, as long as she suffered from the morbid fascination with self-deceptiveness.¹⁷⁵ This statement referred to tragedy as a tool to tear off the hypocritical disguise of the existing literary tradition, and was also in line with Lu Xun's critique of the Chinese national character. While he did not go into detail with this sentence in criticism, Lu Xun provided a series of examples in his literary creation during this period, with the theme of "the shattering of the worthwhile in life" remained at the heart of his literary concerns.

2.1.3 Summary

The development of the intellectual discourse on tragedy in the 1920s can be concluded as follows: scholars started with the critique of the literary pattern of *Datanyuan*, making it the anti-tragic element for their rejection of Chinese tragedies as well as of the existing literary tradition; they then defined tragedy from several

¹⁷² Bing, "Zhongxi xiju zhi bijiao" (The comparison between Chinese and Western drama), 329.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 330.

¹⁷⁴ Lu Xun, "Zailun Leifeng ta de daodiao" (More on the collapse of the Leifeng pagoda), first published in *Yusi* (Tattler) 15, February 23, 1925, reprinted in *Lu Xun quanji, di yi juan* (Complete works of Lu Xun, vol. 1) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 201-207. English translation taken from *Lu Xun, Selected Works*, vol. 2, trans. Yang Xianyi, and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980), 116.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 203.

aspects, either concerned with tragedy's constructive role in literary revolution, or with the aesthetic features of tragedy as an artistic form of expression.

The scholarly discussions at this time were somewhat superficial and unsystematic: on the one hand, there was little direct reference to any foreign theories or tragic works; on the other hand, the intellectual research and debates were largely fragmented. New Culture intellectuals publicised their opinions mainly through some isolated words and passages that were scattered among magazines or newspapers; some of the writings were in the forms of preface (*xuyan*), letters (*tongxin*), or random jottings (*suibi*) that were “argued intensely among a rather limited circle of writers”.¹⁷⁶ This may have something to do with the ideological trend prevailing among the New Culture scholars, which was to squeeze the foreign thought evolved from several centuries into a few decades of modern Chinese intellectual history.

As Marston Anderson has observed, “a sense of national crisis mandated” the modern Chinese introduction of foreign things with “a keen sense of urgency”; as a result, the New Culture intellectuals “did not have the luxury to slowly explore the philosophical and social ramifications of each system of thought or artistic genre they encountered”.¹⁷⁷ This viewpoint revealed a dilemma facing modern Chinese intelligentsia when introducing foreign ideas for social and ideological rejuvenation: on the one hand, they were focusing upon a wide variety of thought, which had been developing over several hundred years across different schools and thus needed to be carefully comprehended and digested; on the other hand, the pressing social and political imperatives had been urging greatly the progress of literary evolution to be shortened into some twenty or thirty years. As Michel Hockx describes, many New

¹⁷⁶ Kirk A. Denton, ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature 1893-1945* (California: Stanford University Press, 1996), 19.

¹⁷⁷ Anderson, *Limits of Realism*, 3.

Culture intellectuals believed that “evolution could be created and accelerated”;¹⁷⁸ therefore, it was not surprising that they accepted at one time a variety of literary currents that “more or less reflected the contents of almost all the literary schools of European countries since the eighteenth century”.¹⁷⁹ However, according to Leo Ou-fan Lee, the imported ideas and terms “were not engaged in the full semantic context” of their foreign origins due to the obvious “linguistic and cultural barriers”¹⁸⁰ between different literary traditions, because few Chinese intellectuals in the 1920s “were interested in literary theory qua theory” except to employ it “for argument in order to attack or defend an extra-literary cause”.¹⁸¹

The various interpretations of the concept of tragedy in the 1920s were distinguished by their different focuses: Hu Shi, Lu Yin, and Lu Xun carried a pragmatic perspective including tragedy into the iconoclastic anti-traditional agenda; while Xu Zhimo, Bing Xin, and Xiong Foxi emphasised more on the literary and aesthetic elements of tragedy. Kirk Denton refers to these two perspectives as literary utilitarianism and literary aestheticism, and proposes a “fundamental” distinction between them.¹⁸² However, this study suggests a less absolute antagonism between these two; because the literary aestheticism during this period, at least in the field of the study of tragedy, offered at the same time some possibilities of sharing with the literary utilitarianism the concern over prevailing social problems. For example, Bing Xin’s promotion of tragedy in the context of “the decay of the country” (*guojia de*

¹⁷⁸ Michel Hockx, “Is There a May Fourth Literature? A Reply to Wang Xiaoming,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 11, no. 2 (1999): 45.

¹⁷⁹ Li Helin, *Jin ershi nian Zhongguo wenyi sichao lun* (On the Chinese literary trends of the recent two decades) (Shanghai: Shenghuo shudian, 1939), 1. English translation taken from Ching-mao Cheng, “The Impact of Japanese Literary Trends on Modern Chinese Writers,” in *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*, ed. Merle Goldman (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977), 72-73.

¹⁸⁰ Leo Ou-fan Lee, “Incomplete Modernity: Rethinking the May Fourth Intellectual Project,” in *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: China’s May Fourth Project*, eds. Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, Oldřich Král, and Graham Martin Sanders (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 34.

¹⁸¹ Lee, “Quest for Modernity,” 493.

¹⁸² Denton, *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, 30.

shuaibai)¹⁸³ indicated her socio-political perspective; Xiong Foxi associated tragedy with social chaos and moral degradation that made people powerless and helpless,¹⁸⁴ which also shared this standpoint. This tendency exemplifies Li Zehou's description of the New Culture intellectual trend as "the task of national salvation overriding the appeal for enlightenment".¹⁸⁵ In this case, any artistic interest in tragedy may seem inappropriate and thus inevitably being largely overlooked.

The examination above shows an overlap between the discourse on tragedy and the discourse on literature as a whole in the New Culture period, when political concern intervened on a certain literary interest. In other words, in modern Chinese literary context of the 1920s, any engagement with the concept of tragedy was somewhat inevitably in tune with the overall iconoclastic agenda, which served the utilitarian purpose of transforming Chinese society through a new literature. Consequently, Chinese intellectuals at this time perceived tragedy not only as a new literary genre or aesthetic concept, but more importantly as an ideological weapon with which to attack the existing Chinese literary traditions, and to "pave the way for a complete transformation of Chinese society".¹⁸⁶ This attempt associated tragedy with a pragmatic stance from the very beginning of its reception in China, which, as observed by Chen Pingyuan, was "more ideological than literary"¹⁸⁷ regarding the significant influences it left on the Chinese understanding of tragedy in the following decades.

2.2 LITERARY CREATIVITY: DIFFERENT EXPRESSIONS OF SOCIAL CONCERNS

¹⁸³ Bing, "Zhongxi xiju zhi bijiao" (The comparison between Chinese and Western drama), 330.

¹⁸⁴ Xiong, "Women xianzai de da beiju" (The grand tragedy in our times), 14.

¹⁸⁵ Li Zehou, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang shilun* (Modern Chinese intellectual history) (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 1987), 32.

¹⁸⁶ Anderson, *Limits of Realism*, 3.

¹⁸⁷ Chen Pingyuan, *Touches of History: An Entry Into 'May Fourth' China*, trans. Michel Hockx with Maria af Sandeberg, Uganda Sze Pui Kwan, Christopher Neil Payne, and Christopher Rosenmeier (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2011), 101.

The theoretical discussions in the 1920s of the concept of tragedy in general produced responses on three aspects of contemporary literary creativity: the first was the association between *the tragic* and the truthfulness of literature, which made the faithful presentation of life and society one leading principle for New Culture writers; the second was the introspection and critique on the Chinese national character, which was derived from a deep concern over prevailing social issues but concentrated more on exploring the internal causes of people's miserable life experiences; the third was the advocacy of the idea of individualism, which served as an intellectual expression of both the writers' awakening self-awareness and their tragic consciousness produced by dramatic social changes.

In regard to the two major trends – realism and romanticism – that influenced the formation of a tragic literary tradition at this time, the first two aspects were basically realist due to their down-to-earth subject matters, such as feudalism oppression, enlightenment, warfare, and social injustice; while the third aspect carried some romantic features in its tragic narrative, in terms of an obvious involvement with personal sentiments and subjective lyricism. At the same time, the line between the realist/political and romantic/aesthetic perspectives was rather blurred, which revealed certain contested features of the notion of the tragic in the 1920s Chinese literary context.

2.2.1 The Realist and Romantic Interpretations of *the Tragic*

1) *The tragic* and the Truthfulness of Literature

The association of *the tragic* with the truthfulness of literature was largely a result of the rejection of the *Datanyuan*. This literary trend originated in the dramatic field, but soon expanded into other literary disciplines. Many New Culture writers stood in the same position as their contemporary critics in negating the existence of Chinese tragedies, expressed contempt for the so-called deceptiveness of Chinese literature expressed through the popular ending pattern of happy reunion: “They believed it

was exactly due to a lack of truthfulness in traditional Chinese literature that it could never nurture such a literary genre as tragedy; accordingly, they regarded the *Datanyuan* to be anti-tragic because it was in essence anti-realist.”¹⁸⁸ As this study has observed, this perception created a literary pursuit of “counter-*Datanyuan*”; a series of works with unhappy endings thus emerged and became a new favourite for realist writers. Literary creation of this type exposed directly the darkness of the society, and the “immense suffering and exploitation”¹⁸⁹ the Chinese people were experiencing. Consequently, the protagonists of these works were usually innocent victims of social chaos or injustice; they either resigned themselves to the misfortunes or resisted against the unfair treatment, but all ended in physical or mental destruction after being driven to desperate conditions by the external environment – usually the feudal marriage system or the ceaseless warfare.

The intimate connection between *the tragic* and social realities that were mostly gloomy and oppressive was particularly stimulated by the Chinese reception of Henrik Ibsen at this time.¹⁹⁰ Many New Culture intellectuals considered Ibsen’s plays – *A Doll’s House* (1879) in particular – to be models for establishing a tragic tradition as well as “a literature of realism and social criticism”¹⁹¹ that were both absent in modern China.

For example, He Yigong¹⁹² referred to *A Doll’s House* (also often translated as *Nora* during the New Culture period) as “a tragedy of high quality” depicting “the

¹⁸⁸ Huang Yaomian, and Tong Qingbing, eds., *Zhongxi bijiao shixue tixi* (The comparative poetics between China and the West) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1991), 727.

¹⁸⁹ McDougall, and Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, 82.

¹⁹⁰ In 1918, *Xin qingnian* (New youth) – one of the most influential literary magazines during the New Culture Movement – published a special issue (vol.4, no.6) on Ibsen, including Hu Shi’s critical essay “Yibusheng zhuyi” (Ibsenism), Yuan Changying’s biographical article “Yibusheng zhuan” (Biography of Ibsen), and the translated scripts of *A Doll’s House* (1879, three acts), *An Enemy of the People* (1882, Act One), and *Little Eyolf* (1894, Act One). An “Ibsen craze” soon swept across China as more translated scripts, critical essays and biographies mushroomed in the following years.

¹⁹¹ Yu, *Chinese Drama after the Cultural Revolution*, 2.

¹⁹² He Yigong (?-1926), chief editor of *Qinghua zhoukan* (Qinghua weekly), studying at Qinghua University at the time.

sadness of a wife leaving home”, and regarded its structure “suit perfectly well the miserable sense of the tragic with great power”.¹⁹³ Fang Xin¹⁹⁴ considered this play as “a tragedy of a couple with huge differences from each other in character”, and suggested that “women should first of all strive for human rights” in order to avoid similar tragedies.¹⁹⁵ Lu Xun concentrated on Nora’s encounters after leaving home; he claimed that “the most painful moment in life is when one wakes up [to the current predicament] but finds no way out”,¹⁹⁶ indicating his concern about the likely vain struggle of an individual against the environment, which was largely tragic in essence. Mao Dun¹⁹⁷ compared Ibsen’s plays with the ancient Greek tragedies in terms of the presentation of the struggle between mankind and other “irresistible forces” – such as the theme of man versus society in Ibsen’s plays.¹⁹⁸ Hu Shi, similarly, termed the so-called “Ibsenism” (*Yibusheng zhuyi*)¹⁹⁹ as the

¹⁹³ He Yigong, “Nü gaoshi yande *Nala*” (Nora performed by Women’s Normal College), first published in *Chenbao fukan* (Literary supplement to the Morning post), May 17-18, 1923, reprinted in *Xianshi zhuyi pipan: Yibusheng zai Zhongguo* (A critique of realism: Ibsen in China), eds. Chen Chun, and Liu Hongtao (Nanchang: Jiangxi gaoxiao chubanshe, 2009), 45.

¹⁹⁴ Fang Xin (1902-1963), formerly known as Cai Fangxin, studying at Drama School of Beijing Renyi (Beijing Renyi xiju zhuanmen xuexiao) at the time, later becomes actor, editor, and translator of Western dramas.

¹⁹⁵ Fang Xin, “Kanle *Nala* hou de lingsui ganxiang” (Some fragmentary thoughts after watching the play Nora), first published in *Chenbao fujian* (Morning news supplement), May 12-13, 1923, reprinted in *Xianshi zhuyi pipan: Yibusheng zai Zhongguo* (A critique of realism: Ibsen in China), eds. Chen Chun, and Liu Hongtao (Nanchang: Jiangxi gaoxiao chubanshe, 2009), 37-38.

¹⁹⁶ Lu Xun, “*Nala* zouhou zenyang” (What happens to Nora after her leaving home), first published in *Wenyi huikan* (Journal of literature and art) 6 by Beijing nüzi gaodeng shifan xuexiao (Beijing Women’s Normal College), reprinted in *Lu Xun quanji, di yi juan* (Complete works of Lu Xun, vol. 1) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 166.

¹⁹⁷ Mao Dun (1896-1981), penname of Shen Dehong. Writer, literary critic, and social activist. One of the influential and most celebrated realist novelists in modern Chinese literature; member of the left-wing league, and participated actively in social campaigns. Major works include *Hong* (Rainbow, 1930), *Linjia puzi* (The Shop of the Lin Family, 1932), and *Ziye* (Midnight, 1933).

¹⁹⁸ Fang Bi [Mao Dun], “Ziran zhuyi xiqu de xianqu Yibusheng” (Ibsen the pioneer of Naturalism), first published in *Xiyang wenxue tonglun* (A general introduction to Western literature) (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1920), reprinted in *Xianshi zhuyi pipan: Yibusheng zai Zhongguo* (A critique of realism: Ibsen in China), eds. Chen Chun, and Liu Hongtao (Nanchang: Jiangxi gaoxiao chubanshe, 2009), 112.

¹⁹⁹ A term which originally came from the essay “Quintessence of Ibsenism” written by George Bernard Shaw in 1891. See George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (London: Walter Scott, 1891).

demonstration of life's predicaments and the portrayal of the direct confrontation between the human and the environment; he held that "Ibsen's literature, as well as his outlook on life, is nothing but realism [*xieshi zhuyi*]"²⁰⁰ Basically, intellectuals of the 1920s interpreted Ibsen's tragic implications in relation to the social context that had produced those tragedies, which served the pragmatic purpose of making drama both "the X ray for searching for the root of society's disease" and "the mirror of the people and the nation".²⁰¹

The influence of Ibsen's tragedies on New Culture literature was so strong that it soon produced a great number of Chinese imitations, namely, social problem plays/fiction (*shehui wenti ju/xiaoshuo*), which, as indicated by the name, concentrated on "all sorts of problems in society", such as "labour issues, women's emancipation, moral principles, and religion".²⁰² Consequently, a tragic narrative gradually took shape when this literary realist concern was expressed through the presentation of certain bitter and miserable experiences encountering the protagonists. A brief survey among works collected in *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi* (Compendium of modern Chinese literature)²⁰³ shows that tragic works of this type accounted for a considerable proportion of the literary creation at this time. The central theme of these works was to claim that "it is the society that should be blamed for people's sins";²⁰⁴ consequently, the New Culture writers saw tragedy as a weapon to either

²⁰⁰ Hu, "Yibusheng zhuyi" (Ibsenism), 179.

²⁰¹ "Minzhong xiju she xuanyan" (The declaration of People's Drama Society), first published in *Xiju* (Drama) 1, no. 1 (1921), reprinted in *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue ziliao yu yanjiu, xia* (The materials and research on modern Chinese literature, Part 2), eds. Li Chunyu, and Yang Zhi (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2008), 487.

²⁰² Chen Wangdao, "Wenxue xiao cidian" (Concise dictionary of literature), *Minguo ribao fukan, juewu* (Supplement to Republican daily news, Awakening), May 10, 1921.

²⁰³ A comprehensive collection of modern Chinese literary works. The first compilation, being published between 1935 and 1936 in Shanghai by Liangyou book company, is the earliest of its kind, which collects the major works from both theoretical discussions and literary creativity produced during the New Culture Movement (1917-1927).

²⁰⁴ Hong Shen, "Hong Shen xuanji zixu" (Self-introduction to Selected works of Hong Shen), in *Hong Shen wenji, di yi juan* (Collected works of Hong Shen, vol. 1), ed., Zhongguo xiju jia xiehui (The Association of Chinese Playwrights) (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1957), 490.

“voice social discontent”²⁰⁵ or “expose social evils and deliver poetic justice to the downcast and the wounded”,²⁰⁶ and thus imbued their tragic narratives with an obvious perspective of realism.

However, the more or less simple equation between *the tragic* and realism in the 1920s brought controversies to the Chinese understanding of the idea of the tragic. Apparently, this perception was largely profane; it placed the primary emphasis on practical matters relating to the physical existence of the people in society, which was different from its European origins that usually explored certain philosophical implications in tragedy.

This can be exemplified by the divergent interpretations of Ibsen’s tragic plays between the scholarship of the 1920s and that of the later periods. Whereas the New Culture intellectuals considered the core of Ibsen’s tragedies to be unhappy marriages caused by the unhealthy social institution, or the confrontation between an individual and the environment or among different classes, later research tends to focus more on Ibsen’s insight into the existential predicament of modern man, as well as into the intrinsic relation between modern tragic spirit and the crisis of modern civilisation.²⁰⁷ For example, Lukács suggests that, for Ibsen, “tragedy originates in individuals who act upon and experience the opportunities available to them”; but at the same time there are also certain forces “prevail[ing] over the characters and impel[ling] them in a certain direction” towards which “at the end of the road disaster awaits”.²⁰⁸ Yet, this relatively abstract and metaphysical matter was not of central concern for the

²⁰⁵ Lee, “Quest for Modernity,” 452.

²⁰⁶ Wang, “Chinese literature from 1841 to 1937,” 504.

²⁰⁷ For scholarship on this aspect, see, for example, Bjørn Hemmer, “Ibsen and the Realistic Problem Drama,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, ed. James McFarlane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 68-88; He Chengzhou, *Henrik Ibsen and Modern Chinese Drama* (Oslo: Unipub forlag, 2004); William Storm, “Lukács/Ibsen: Tragedy, Selfhood, and ‘Real Life’ in *The Master Builder* and *When We Dead Awaken*,” *Comparative Drama* 46, no. 1 (2012): 17-39; and Wang Ning, ed., *Yibusheng yu xiandai xing: xifang yu Zhongguo* (Ibsen and modernity: The West and China) (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2001).

²⁰⁸ Georg Lukács, “Thoughts on Henrik Ibsen,” in *The Lukács Reader*, ed. Arpad Kadarkey (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 103-104.

New Culture intellectuals, who were mainly addressing issues of cultural crisis and socio-political transformation. Instead, they focused on such secular elements of Ibsen's tragic sense as the exploration of "the darkness of society, the cruelty of genetic inheritance, the misunderstanding and alienation within the family, as well as the miseries resulting from hypocrisy, selfishness and prejudice".²⁰⁹

On the other hand, later scholars hold that the New Culture perception of realism was problematic, too. They consider it an "academic bias"²¹⁰ for creative writing to deal with the actual life experience without the artificial mediation of literary or cultural conventions",²¹¹ which was "by no means a realistic prospectus".²¹² In this regard, to indiscriminately equate *the tragic* with the so-called realism bears the risk of simplifying tragedy to drama of sorrow (*aiju*) or drama of misery (*canju*), because this "tragic realism" was "perceived from the writer's individual point of view"²¹³ as the presentation of miseries and deaths in everyday life, which only "seeks exclusively after shallow emotional stimulation rather than any tragic sublimity".²¹⁴ This opinion is in line with that of Xu Zhimo and Bing Xin, which distinguished in literary creativity between *the tragic* and mere sadness. It also points out a potential risk caused by the association between tragedy and realism among modern Chinese intellectuals in the 1920s, as "[t]o introduce all kinds of miseries into the territory of *the tragic* will definitely degrade tragedy of its seriousness".²¹⁵

2) *The tragic* and the National Character

In accordance with his critique of the Chinese national character, Lu Xun has been

²⁰⁹ Hong Shen, "Shuyu yige shidai de xiju" (Drama that belongs to an era), in *Hong Shen xiqu ji* (Collected operas of Hong Shen) (Shanghai: Xiandai shuju, 1933), iv-v.

²¹⁰ McDougall, and Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, 157.

²¹¹ Lee, "Quest for Modernity," 493.

²¹² Eberstein, *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature*, 7.

²¹³ Lee, "Quest for Modernity," 452.

²¹⁴ Tian Benxiang, ed. *Zhongguo xiandai bijiao xiju shi* (History of modern Chinese comparative drama) (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1993), 73.

²¹⁵ Zhang Chang, "Zhongguo beiju yanjiu de kunhuo yu sikao" (The perplexity and reflection of the study of Chinese tragedy), *Zhongguo renmin daxue xuebao* (Journal of Renmin University of China), no. 4 (1996): 81.

well acknowledged for establishing a distinctive tragic narrative during the New Culture period. He expanded the modern Chinese perception of *the tragic* into the cultural ideological domain, and thus represented an important trend of development in the formation of a modern Chinese tragic tradition.

Lu Xun wrote a series of short stories on the miserable lives of the ordinary people, depicting the harsh living conditions and mental state of the depressed rural populace of the 1920s. Sharing the same literary realist standpoint with the social problem plays and fiction at this time, Lu Xun's short stories featured distinctive profundity and complexity in their inward exploration of "the weakness in the national character"²¹⁶ through the dissection of "a modern Chinese soul",²¹⁷ "which gives both intellectual and artistic depth to an otherwise shallow corpus of early May Fourth literature".²¹⁸

The publication of Lu Xun's two collections of short stories in the 1920s, namely, *Nahan* (Call to arms, 1923),²¹⁹ and *Panghuang* (Wandering, 1926),²²⁰ established his "fictional legacy" during the New Culture literary movement.²²¹ Later scholar Liu Zaifu identifies five types of themes in these stories;²²² this study, on the basis of

²¹⁶ Lu Xun, "Zaitan baoliu" (Further views on reservation), *Lu Xun quanji, di wu juan* (Complete works of Lu Xun, vol. 5) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 154.

²¹⁷ Lu Xun, "Ewen yiben A Q zhengzhuan xu" (Preface to the Russian version of A True Story of Ah Q), *Lu Xun quanji, di qi juan* (Complete works of Lu Xun, vol. 7) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 83.

²¹⁸ Merle Goldman, and Leo Ou-fan Lee, eds., *An Intellectual History of Modern China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 174.

²¹⁹ A collection of fourteen short stories written by Lu Xun during 1918 and 1922; first published by Xinchao chubanshe (Beijing) in 1923.

²²⁰ A collection of eleven short stories written by Lu Xun during 1924 and 1925; first published by Beixin shuju (Beijing) in 1926.

²²¹ Goldman, and Lee, *An Intellectual History of Modern China*, 174.

²²² They are, namely, the tragedy of the entire Chinese nation, as represented by *Kuangren riji* (A Madman's Diary, 1918); the tragedy of the poor Chinese peasants, as represented by *A Q zhengzhuan* (The True Story of Ah Q, 1921-1922) and *Guxiang* (My Old Home, 1921); the tragedy of the Chinese labouring women, as represented by *Zhufu* (The New-year Sacrifice, 1924); the tragedy of Chinese underclass intellectuals, as represented by *Kong Yiji* (Kong Yiji, 1919) and *Shangshi* (Regret for the Past, 1925); the tragedy of the pre-May Fourth democratic revolutionaries, as represented by *Yao* (Medicine, 1919). See Liu Zaifu, *Lu Xun meixue sixiang lungao* (Essays on the aesthetic thoughts of Lu Xun) (Beijing: Zhongguo kexue shehui chubanshe, 1981), 97.

this classification, observes three groups of characters in Lu Xun's short stories of the 1920s: first, the much oppressed ordinary people in the rural uncivilised villages, as represented by Mistress Xianglin (*Xianglin sao*) in *Zhufu* (The New-year Sacrifice, 1924),²²³ and Runtu in *Guxiang* (My Old Home, 1921);²²⁴ second, the frustrated men of letters living in abject poverty, such as Kong Yiji in *Kong Yiji* (Kong Yiji, 1919),²²⁵ and Wei Lianshu in *Gudu zhe* (The Loner, 1925);²²⁶ third, the ignorant and indifferent mass of the public that incarnate the Chinese people whose mentality is manipulated by feudal ethics, as seen in Ah Q in *A Q zhengzhuang* (The True Story of Ah Q, 1921-1922),²²⁷ and Hua Laoshuan in *Yao* (Medicine, 1919).²²⁸ The

²²³ First published in *Dongfang zazhi* (The eastern miscellany) 21, no. 6 (1924): 97-108, reprinted in *Panghuang* (Wandering) (Beijing: Beixin shuju, 1926). The female protagonist in the story, Mistress Xianglin, is a classic example of the labouring women in old China. She has experienced during her lifetime a series of unfortunate things, such as widowhood, being sold as a wife, losing her only son, begging, and dying on the street. Despite the hard work and kind-heartedness of Mistress Xianglin, the people around show little sympathy for her miseries and even add more pain to her life by their apathy and leaving her in isolation.

²²⁴ First published in *Xin Qingnian* (New youth) 9, no. 1 (1921): 116-123, reprinted in *Nahan* (Call to arms) (Beijing: Xinchao she, 1923). The story is largely autobiographical in portraying Runtu, the writer's old acquaintance and best childhood friend, from being a smart and active boy to a sluggish and reticent middle-aged man. Through presenting the great changes that happened to Runtu, Lu Xun expresses his concern about the division among people made by class differences, as well as the confinement and destruction of human nature by feudalism.

²²⁵ First published in *Xin qingnian* (New youth) 6, no. 4 (1919): 40-43, reprinted in *Nahan* (Call to arms) (Beijing: Xinchao she, 1923). Kong Yiji is a local literary man in the last few years of the Qing Dynasty who fails to pass the imperial examination even at the county level. Stubbornly adhering to the outdated rules and ideas, he has no financial support nor labouring work, and is struggling in poverty to maintain his so-called intellectual reputation. He is depicted as a victim of the imperial examination system who is abandoned by the society.

²²⁶ First published in *Lu Xun quanji, di er juan* (Complete works of Lu Xun, vol. 2) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005). Wei Lianshu represents a typical group of Chinese intellectuals in the May Fourth period: he is enlightened by the new thinking but is for this reason alienated by people around for making constant social criticism. However, his ideal for freedom and independence is soon replaced by despair and hopelessness due to his realisation of the unchangeable nature of the society, and he finally ends in spiritual and physical destruction.

²²⁷ First published in *Chenbao fukan* (Literary supplement to the Morning post), 4 December 1921 – 12 February 1922, reprinted in *Nahan* (Call to arms) (Beijing: Xinchao she, 1923). Ah Q is regarded as one of the most famous fictional images created by Lu Xun in his dissection of the Chinese national character. Ah Q lives under the oppression of the old Chinese social institutions and conventions. Despite his poor, miserable life, he possesses a strong sense of superciliousness and snobbishness; his method of gaining himself "spiritual victories" (*jingshen shengli fa*) is particularly classic in embodying the Chinese mentality as summarised by Lu Xun.

common theme of these short stories is, to quote the writer himself, “the unfortunates in this abnormal society”;²²⁹ in other words, corresponding to his conception of tragedy at this time (“tragedy shows how what is worthwhile in life is shattered”), Lu Xun presents through his short stories what is “worthwhile” in life and how it is “shattered” in a deformed society.

The contemporary reviews of these works basically focused upon two aspects. On the one hand, critics recognised the distinctive tragic sense in Lu Xun’s short stories. For example, Mao Dun referred to the “central idea” of *Guxiang* as “the sadness of the incomprehension and estrangement among people”.²³⁰ Zeng Qiushi²³¹ considered *Yao* to have “an eternal value”, in that it depicted “a tragedy that mankind can never get rid of” – “one seeks happiness for the masses, who, in return, are going to eat his flesh”.²³² Xiang Peiliang²³³ observed in *Gudu zhe* “a grief of loneliness” of those reformists, who “once struggled on their own and were finally swallowed by

²²⁸ First published in *Xin qingnian* (New Youth) 6 (5), 1919, reprinted in *Nahan* (Call to Arms) (Beijing: Xinchao she, 1923). In this story, a young revolutionary is executed for participating in the rebellion against the Qing Dynasty; while the onlookers – one of them is Hua Laoshuan who hopes to save his dying son – are busy getting his blood for the curing of disease. The apparent theme of this story is superstition which was rather prevalent among the Chinese at that time; but Lu Xun aims to explore some profound problems such as ignorance and indifference underlying the Chinese national character.

²²⁹ Lu Xun, “Wo zenme zuoqi xiaoshuo lai” (How I started writing fiction), *Lu Xun quanji, di si juan* (Complete works of Lu Xun, vol. 4) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 526. English translation taken from Leo Ou-fan Lee, “Literary Trends I: The Quest for Modernity, 1895-1927,” in *The Cambridge History of China vol. 12: Republican China, 1912-1949, Part 1*. ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 484.

²³⁰ Mao Dun, “Ping si wu liu yue de chuanguo” (On literary creation during April, May and June), first published in *Xiaoshuo yuebao* (Short story monthly) 12, no. 8 (1921), reprinted in *Mao Dun xuanji, di wu juan, wenlun* (Selected works of Mao Dun, vol. 5, literary criticism) (Chengdu: Sichuan wenyi chubanshe, 1985), 45.

²³¹ Zeng Qiushi, pseudonym of Sun Fuyuan (1894-1966), essayist, editor of *Chenbao fukan* (Literary supplement to the Morning post), student of Lu Xun; one of the founders of “Wenxue yanjiu hui” (The Chinese Literary Association), introduced actively a variety of Western literary works and writers during the New Culture period.

²³² Zeng Qiushi [Sun Fuyuan], “Guanyu Lu Xun xiansheng” (About Mr. Lu Xun), *Chenbao fukan* (Literary supplement to the Morning post), January 24 (1924): 4.

²³³ Xiang Peiliang (1905-1959), playwright, aesthetician; research interests covered a wide range of areas such as dramaturgical theory and criticism, performing arts, theoretical study of drama creativity and stage performance.

desolation”.²³⁴ Zhang Dinghuang,²³⁵ on the whole, held that what Lu Xun presented in his short stories were “extremely ordinary people and commonplace things”; yet, “he demonstrates to us that it is exactly these people and things that are expressive of an encompassing, eternal sense of *the tragic*”.²³⁶

On the other hand, critics also associated Lu Xun’s tragic implications with his explicit critique of the Chinese national character, and therefore placed those short stories in the domain of literary realism as they “expose the disease so as to draw attention to its cure”.²³⁷ In this respect, Mao Dun considered the image of Ah Q “the incarnation of the Chinese character”,²³⁸ which was “ferocious in appearance but timid in essence” (*seli er neiren*);²³⁹ Zhou Zuoren²⁴⁰ referred to Ah Q’s “lack of will to live and respect for life” as “the biggest cause of a Chinese disease”.²⁴¹

²³⁴ Xiang Peiliang, “Lun *Gudu zhe*” (On The Loner), first published in *Kuangbiao* (Hurricane) 5 (1926), reprinted in *Liushi nian lai Lu Xun yanjiu lunwen xuan, xia* (Collection of essays in Lu Xun studies from the past sixty years, Part 2), eds. Li Zongying, and Zhang Mengyang (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 46-48.

²³⁵ Zhang Dinghuang (1895-1986), writer, literary historian and critic, translator; one of the founders of “The Creation Society” (*Chuangzao she*); one of the influential scholars in the early phase of Lu Xun studies.

²³⁶ Zhang Dinghuang, “Lu Xun xiansheng” (Mr. Lu Xun), first published in *Xiandai pinglun* (Modern criticism), January 1925, reprinted in *Liushi nian lai Lu Xun yanjiu lunwen xuan, shang* (Collection of essays in Lu Xun studies from the past sixty years, Part 1), eds. Li Zongying, and Zhang Mengyang (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 32.

²³⁷ Lu, “Wo zenme zuoqi xiaoshuo lai” (How I started writing fiction), 526. English translation taken from Leo Ou-fan Lee, “Literary Trends I: The Quest for Modernity, 1895-1927,” in *The Cambridge History of China vol. 12: Republican China, 1912-1949, Part 1*. ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 484.

²³⁸ Shen Yanbing [Mao Dun], “Tongxin” (Letters), *Xiaoshuo yuebao* (Short story monthly) 13, no.2 (1922): 139.

²³⁹ Yan Bing [Mao Dun], “Du *Nahan*” (Reading Call to Arms), first published in *Shishi xinbao, wenxue fukan* (Current events newspaper, Literary supplement), October 8, 1923, reprinted in *Liushi nian lai Lu Xun yanjiu lunwen xuan, shang* (Collection of essays in Lu Xun studies from the past sixty years, Part 1), eds. Li Zongying, and Zhang Mengyang (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 13.

²⁴⁰ Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967), essayist, literary theorist and critic, translator, the younger brother of Lu Xun; a representative figure of the New Culture Movement; one of the founders of “The Chinese Literary Association” (*Wenxue yanjiu hui*), specialised in the study of Japanese literature and culture.

²⁴¹ Zhou Zuoren, “A *Q zhengzhuàn*” (The True Story of Ah Q), first published in *Chenbao fukan, ziji de yuandi* (Literary supplement to the Morning post, the field of one’s own), March 19, 1923, reprinted in *Liushi nian lai Lu Xun yanjiu lunwen xuan, shang* (Collection of essays in Lu Xun studies from the past sixty years, Part 1), eds. Li Zongying, and Zhang Mengyang (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 11.

This perspective became more closely connected to social criticism with the rising trend of the politicisation of literature in the later 1920s; some critics were no longer satisfied with attributing solely the tragedies of the people to the national character, but would further explore external factors in the society. According to Feng Xuefeng,²⁴² Lu Xun succeeded in “attacking the national character and the darkness of human nature”; but “he does not indicate in his works that both the national character and the human ugliness have something to do with the economic system”.²⁴³ Yi Sheng²⁴⁴ criticised Lu Xun for “not calling upon the peasants to fight against their fate”: “what he does is just coldly describe [the rural life] and then present [it] to appeal for your astonishment”, which “may be a negative contribution to the revolution”.²⁴⁵

In a word, Lu Xun’s short stories of the 1920s in the first place illustrate the point he makes in the theoretical discussions, that tragedy shows the good and innocent (the “worthwhile”) being manipulated or destroyed by the external environment – both the inhumane society and the indifferent onlookers of others’ misfortunes (how it is “shattered”). Moreover, his tragic narratives are included by his contemporary critics in the standpoint of literary realism, which is to convey through the critique on the Chinese national character the urgent appeal for the reform of “a ‘diseased’ society in dire need of a cure”.²⁴⁶ Thus, Lu Xun’s short stories serve as another

²⁴² Feng Xuefeng (1903-1976), poet, literary theorist, one of the important leading figures of “League of Chinese Left-Wing Writers” (*Zhongguo zuoyi zuojia lianmeng*), early member of the Chinese Communist Party.

²⁴³ Hua Shi [Feng Xuefeng], “Geming yu zhishi jieji” (Revolution and intelligentsia), first published in *Zhongguo wenyi lunzhan* (Chinese literary debate), May 1928, reprinted in *Liushi nian lai Lu Xun yanjiu lunwen xuan, shang* (Collection of essays in Lu Xun studies from the past sixty years, Part 1), eds. Li Zongying, and Zhang Mengyang (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 81-82.

²⁴⁴ A revolutionary young student in Guangzhou. The true identity of the author remains unspecified.

²⁴⁵ Yi Sheng, “Disan yang shijie de chuanguzao – women suo yingdang huanying de Lu Xun” (The creation of a third world – What we should welcome of Lu Xun), first published in *Shaonian xianfeng* (Young pioneer) 2, no. 15 (1927), reprinted in *Liushi nian lai Lu Xun yanjiu lunwen xuan, shang* (Collection of essays in Lu Xun studies from the past sixty years, Part 1), eds. Li Zongying, and Zhang Mengyang (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 52-53.

²⁴⁶ Lee, “Quest for Modernity,” 485.

example of the close connection between *the tragic* and realism during the New Culture period.

3) *The tragic* and Sentimentalism

Romanticism is another literary trend that has influenced the formation of the New Culture tragic tradition. Later scholars generally interpret this impact from three aspects: first, to see romanticism as a remedy for utilitarian realism,²⁴⁷ because it emphasises the artistic elements of tragedy which are largely neglected by the pragmatic view. This opinion connects the romantic trend with the aesthetic perspective in theoretical discussions of the concept of tragedy in the 1920s. In addition, certain lyrical elements featured with “the emotional directness of personal experience”²⁴⁸ in tragic narratives of this kind are also highlighted as a response to “the quest for individual freedom inherent to the May Fourth Movement”.²⁴⁹

Second, to place romanticism within the iconoclastic tradition²⁵⁰ in light of the European evolutionary concept of literature. This concept has been introduced into the modern Chinese literary field around the early phase of the New Culture Movement, favouring a progression from classicism to romanticism and then to realism in European literary history.²⁵¹ Therefore, this perspective regarded romanticism as progressive in that “it breaks with those conventions” of

²⁴⁷ Tian, *Zhongguo xiandai bijiao xiju shi* (History of modern Chinese comparative drama), 172.

²⁴⁸ Baldick, *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 223.

²⁴⁹ Chih-tsing Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1961), 102.

²⁵⁰ Sun Qingsheng, *Zhongguo xiandai xiju sichao shi* (History of the trend of thought of modern Chinese drama) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1994), 25-26.

²⁵¹ In 1915 Chen Duxiu mentioned this progression in *Xiandai Ouzhou wenyi shitan* (A discussion of the history of modern European literature and art) (*Xin qingnian* (New youth) 1, no. 3 (1915): 40-41.) and proposed that Chinese literature should follow the same current of literary evolution. See details in *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, ed. Tse-tsung Chow (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 272; and *1898-1949 Zhongwai wenxue bijiao shi* (History of Chinese and foreign comparative literature, 1898-1949), eds. Fan Boqun, and Zhu Donglin (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 1993), 313.

classicism,²⁵² and thus fits into the counter-traditional discourse prevailing during the New Culture Movement.²⁵³

The third opinion highlights the subjective and self-expressive features of romanticism, focusing mainly upon its competence in expressing the “unresolved ambivalence”²⁵⁴ which resulted from social and intellectual transformations. This viewpoint holds that certain romantic senses such as sentimentality, melancholy, and loneliness have a stronger appeal to the new generation of Chinese intellectuals rather than a purely iconoclastic approach;²⁵⁵ it is especially the case when the tide of the New Culture Movement starts to decline in the late 1920s, making romanticism a natural way of expression for the enlightened young intellectuals of their “inner reaction”²⁵⁶ towards a gradually fading enthusiasm and vanishing ideal. This opinion takes into consideration the social and literary context of the Chinese reception of romanticism in the 1920s, when “old civilization was shaken” and the new ideas were still “divergent and confusing”.²⁵⁷

Yu Dafu, one of the well-acknowledged romantic writers in the 1920s, regarded works of a “melancholic and resentful, nostalgic and fatalistic” nature as the “most popular” at a time “when a country faces rapid disintegration or is on the verge of collapse”.²⁵⁸ Here, the rise of sentimental literature has something to do with “the

²⁵² Liang Shiqiu, “Xiandai Zhongguo wenxue zhi langman de qushi” (The romantic trend in modern Chinese literature), *Chenbao fukan* (Literary supplement to the Morning post), March 25 (1926): 58.

²⁵³ See, Lee, “Quest for Modernity,” 492; and Jeffrey N. Cox, “Romantic Redefinitions of the Tragic,” in *Romantic Drama*, ed. Gerald Gillespie (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1994), 155.

²⁵⁴ Lee, “Quest for Modernity,” 452.

²⁵⁵ Fan Boqun, and Zhu Donglin, eds., *1898-1949 Zhongwai wenxue bijiao shi* (History of Chinese and foreign comparative literature, 1898-1949) (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 1993), 316.

²⁵⁶ Janko Lavrin, *Studies in European Literature* (New York: R.R. Smith, 1930), 16.

²⁵⁷ Constantine Tung, “T’ien Han and the Romantic Ibsen,” *Modern Drama* 9, no. 4 (1966): 285-286.

²⁵⁸ Yu Dafu, “Wenxue gaishuo” (Introduction to literature), first published by Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1927, reprinted in *Yu Dafu wenji, di wu juan, wenlun* (Collected works of Yu Dafu, vol. 5, literary review) (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1991), 79. English translation taken from Mau-sang Ng, *The Russian Hero in Modern Chinese Fiction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 95.

discovery of the self',²⁵⁹ which is a distinctive result of the New Culture propagation of individualism: the awakened awareness of "the modern Chinese writer's conception of self and society"²⁶⁰ offers them new understanding about their existential experience, but the tragic moment comes when one is "only too aware that his new freedom brought with it the isolation and alienation of intense self-consciousness"²⁶¹ in perceiving a "subjective tension"²⁶² between mankind and society. This can be exemplified by Xiang Peiliang's description of a typical group of enlightened but isolated young intellectuals in China of the 1920s, who "constantly feel depressed" and thus "rise to struggle and resist" against "the deathly silence" around them; but they are regarded by the society as "outsiders" that "have nothing in common with people inside". As a result, they are destined to be spiritually "exiled" due to either their "unwillingness to compromise" or their "misfit" into the existing social conventions.²⁶³

This kind of tragic narrative involves with a lyrical sentimentality, expressing its thematic concern over the protagonists' internal spiritual struggles at a time "full of frustration, distress, fantasy, and hesitation".²⁶⁴ This perspective differs from that of realism which focuses on the external causes of the protagonists' miseries and sufferings. In this regard, Yu Dafu²⁶⁵ provided some examples through typical characterisations of a group of "self-pitying, sickly, and sexually frustrated"²⁶⁶

²⁵⁹ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1973), 249.

²⁶⁰ Lee, "Quest for Modernity," 452.

²⁶¹ Cox, "Romantic Redefinitions of the Tragic," 154.

²⁶² Lee, "Quest for Modernity," 452.

²⁶³ Xiang, "Lun *Gudu zhe*" (On The Loner), 46.

²⁶⁴ Tung, "T'ien Han and the Romantic Ibsen," 391.

²⁶⁵ Yu Dafu (1896-1945), short story writer, poet, one of the founders of "The Creation Society" (*Chuangzao she*) and "League of Chinese Left-Wing Writers" (*Zhongguo zuoyi zuojia lianmeng*) but quit the latter shortly. His collection of short stories *Chenlun* (Sinking) published in 1921 is considered the first of this kind even before Lu Xun's *Nahan* (Call to arms), which made him a literary celebrity of the 1920s.

²⁶⁶ Mair, *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, 745.

youths, who have their “modern minds wracked by contradictions and paradoxes”²⁶⁷ resulted from the conflict between the ideal and reality. In accordance with Xiang Peiliang’s description, the enlightened but isolated young intellectuals form a recurring image in Yu Dafu’s works, such as *Chenlun* (Sinking, 1921),²⁶⁸ *Niaoluo xing* (Wistaria and Dodder, 1923),²⁶⁹ and *Lingyu zhe* (The Superfluous Man, 1924).²⁷⁰ This kind of tragic hero is largely autobiographical due to their life experiences similar to those of the writer himself. Yu engaged his lyrical stories closely with strong personal sentiments, making this a central line for the plot structure.

The contemporary reviews in the main positively evaluated the romantic features in these works in terms of their depiction of “the anxiety of longing for kindness and the depression of hankering after evilness”,²⁷¹ considering Yu Dafu’s sentimentalism

²⁶⁷ Kirk A. Denton, “Romantic Sentiment and the Problem of the Subject: Yu Dafu,” in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, ed. Joshua S. Mostow (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 381.

²⁶⁸ First published in *Chenlun* (Sinking) (Shanghai: Taidong shuju, 1921). A short story presenting the mental depression and moral decline of a young Chinese student during his stay in Japan. This young man is tortured by senses of humiliation and frustration because of both the weakness of his home country and the failure to dispel his sexual repression. He has attempted to change his situation but failed several times, which only exacerbates his desperation. All these experiences produce lingering pain that leads him towards his tragic death in the end.

²⁶⁹ First published in *Chuangzao jikan* (Creation quarterly) 2, no. 1 (1923): 151-166. A short story telling of an educated man’s vain struggle to raise his family in a chaotic society. In this story, the protagonist keeps recalling to his wife how hard their life has been since marriage. Despite the good education he received abroad, the husband cannot find any decent, stable job to support the family; reluctant to resist against the unfair treatment from the society, he blames himself for making his wife live in poverty, and at the same time suffers from deep frustration for his incompetence in being accepted by society.

²⁷⁰ First published in *Taiping yang* (The Pacific) 4, no.7 (1924): 1-8. An essay depicting the spiritual predicament of a young intellectual caught between idealism and reality. The protagonist lives in both abject poverty and mental depression: his loneliness results in his opposition against the whole society – which is outwith his original intention; he finds it impossible to realise his ideal in the cold, harsh reality, so he turns to self-reproach of his uselessness to his family and his country.

²⁷¹ Sun, “*Chuangzao geiwo de yinxiang*” (My impression of *The Creation*), first published in *Shishi xinbao, wenxue xunkan* (Current events newspaper, Literary periodical) 39 (1922), reprinted in *Yu Dafu yanjiu ziliao* (Research materials on Yu Dafu), eds. Wang Zili, and Chen Zishan (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 269.

as a distinctive feature of his tragic narratives. Jin Ming²⁷² praised Yu's "explicit expression of his true feelings towards those simple facts presented in his stories", which was "typically Chinese" and thus easily aroused among people a sense of "pure tragic".²⁷³ Zheng Boqi²⁷⁴ referred to Yu as a "sentimentalist" whose works were "permeated with touching pathos"; he suggested that Yu's sentimental literature was a direct response to and fitted properly the current ideological trend and social background; hence Yu was a representative of the literary tendency of "lyricism" (*shuqing zhuyi*) in the 1920s.²⁷⁵

To Zhou Zuoren, the thematic concern of Yu's works was "the depression of the modern youth" that resulted from "the conflict between the will to live and the reality": "mankind can neither satisfy themselves with the earthly life nor be willing to escape into the emptiness, but rather linger in the harsh and cold reality searching for unobtainable joy and happiness."²⁷⁶ This comment was later reaffirmed by the writer himself: "to the Chinese living in turmoil, death is rather the best thing one can expect from gods; but before that, the tragic sense resulting from spiritual destruction is even more tormented than the most horrible punishment in hell."²⁷⁷ This literary theme echoed and exemplified the aesthetic reading of tragedy in the

²⁷² Jin Ming, full name Li Jinming (1905-1999), writer, educator, member of "League of Chinese Left-Wing Writers" (*Zhongguo zuoyi zuojia lianmeng*), one of the influential scholars in the study of Yu Dafu in the 1920s.

²⁷³ Jin Ming, "Dafu de san shiqi" (The three phases of Dafu), first published in *Yiban* (General) 3, no.1 (1927), reprinted in *Yu Dafu yanjiu ziliao* (Research materials on Yu Dafu), eds. Wang Zili, and Chen Zishan (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 288-289.

²⁷⁴ Zheng Boqi (1895-1979), film script writer, novelist, literary theorist, one of the founders of "The Creation Society" (*Chuangzao she*), an important leading figure of the left-wing literary movement.

²⁷⁵ Zheng Boqi, "Han hui ji piping" (Critique on *Cold ashes*), first published in *Hongshui* (Flood) 3, no. 33 (1927), reprinted in *Yu Dafu yanjiu ziliao* (Research materials on Yu Dafu), eds. Wang Zili, and Chen Zishan (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 283-284.

²⁷⁶ Zhong Mi [Zhou Zuoren], "Chenlun" (Sinking), first published in *Chenbao fukan, wenyi piping lan* (Literary supplement to the Morning post, column of literary criticism), March 26, 1922, reprinted in *Ershi shiji Zhongguo xiaoshuo lilun ziliao, di er juan (1917-1927)* (Theoretical materials on Chinese fiction in the 20th century, vol. 2, 1917-1927), ed. Yan Jiayan (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1997), 214.

²⁷⁷ Yu Dafu, "Dafu quanji zixu" (Self-introduction to The complete works of Dafu), first published in *Han hui ji* (Cold ashes) (Shanghai: Chuangzao she chubanshe, 1927), reprinted in *Yu Dafu yanjiu ziliao* (Research materials on Yu Dafu), eds. Wang Zili, and Chen Zishan (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 155.

theoretical discussions by Bing Xin, Xu Zhimo, and Xiong Foxi, in terms of the exploration into mankind's inner world of their spiritual predicament and crisis.

In conclusion, the literary realist and romantic expressions of *the tragic* can be seen as revealing different aspects of tragic experience encountering the Chinese in the 1920s: the former, the physical material level displaying ordinary people's miserable lives in a corrupted, inhumane society under the shadow of lingering feudalism; the latter, the spiritual level presenting certain mental distress resulting from feelings of emptiness and disillusionment that was torturing the enlightened young generation. With regard to the connection with contemporary theoretical discussions, these two aspects reflect both the political and aesthetic concerns over tragedy's constructive role in social criticism and artistic expression. In other words, the realist and romantic tendencies in literary practice parallel the coexistence of literary utilitarianism and literary aestheticism in literary theory of the 1920s Chinese literary field.

2.2.2 The Blurred Line between Realism and Romanticism

The contemporary literary reviews on tragic works of the 1920s formulated their arguments from both the political and aesthetic perspectives. These two standpoints focused in general on different groups of writers and works. However, there were also certain points where they overlapped to debate over the contested features of the tragic narratives that developed under the influences of realism and romanticism in the 1920s.

The first point was the aesthetic critique on some social problem plays of being over obsessed with the pragmatic function of *the tragic*, and thus letting the strong sense of social criticism diminish the artistic quality of the works. Critics first saw a rigid stereotype or patternisation in many works which served to simply present a problem in the beginning and to solve it in the end. It was obvious among, for instance, a series of Chinese imitations of *A Doll's House*, which all began with the female characters' unhappy marriage and ended with their running away from home

for independence and emancipation.

To Zheng Boqi, “China has developed its own scripts of the social play since the introduction of Ibsen, but it is a pity that most of the Chinese works are following the same pattern due to a lack of originality”.²⁷⁸ While to Pu Boying,²⁷⁹ Xiang Peiliang, and Wen Yiduo,²⁸⁰ the idea that “the problems must be highlighted and any implicitness is not at all necessary”²⁸¹ was largely problematic, because it allowed for such a tendency “to solely concentrate on social problems without even allowing for any dramatic factors”;²⁸² “the more problems are presented, the fewer artistic features are left”.²⁸³ Yu Shangyuan,²⁸⁴ with particular reference to the 1920s social problem plays, considered this defect a result of the playwrights’ ignorance of “the profundity of human nature and life’s impulse”.²⁸⁵ Liang Shiqiu²⁸⁶ connected this problem to the pragmatic acceptance of Ibsen in the New Culture literary field: “During the new literary movement, Ibsen’s thinking attracted more attention than

²⁷⁸ Zheng Boqi, “Xin wenxue zhi jingzhong” (The warning bell of new literature), *Chuangzao zhoubao* (Creation weekly) 31 (1923): 3.

²⁷⁹ Pu Boying (1875-1934), social activist, chief editor of *Chenbao* (Morning post); famous for his contribution to the drama reform; one of the founders of *Xiju yuekan* (Drama weekly) which was the first specialised magazine in modern China for drama studies.

²⁸⁰ Wen Yiduo (1899-1946), poet, social activist for nationalism, advocator of the development of new poem (*xin shi*) in New Culture Movement, one of the representative figures of the Crescent School (*Xinyue pai*); major works are poem collections of *Hongzhu* (Red candle, 1923), and *Sishui* (Stagnant water, 1928).

²⁸¹ Pu Boying, “Xiju yao ruhe shiying guoqing?” (How should drama be adapted to national conditions?), *Xiju* (Drama) 1, no. 4 (1921): 16.

²⁸² Xiang Peiliang, *Zhongguo xiju gaiping* (General review of Chinese drama) (Shanghai: Taidong shuju, 1928), 29.

²⁸³ Wen Yiduo [Xi Xi], “Xiju de qitu” (The crossroad of the theatre), *Chenbao fukan* (Literary supplement to the Morning post), June 24 (1926): 6.

²⁸⁴ Yu Shangyuan (1897-1970), literary theorist, educator of modern Chinese drama; received systematic education on theatrical arts and stage performance in the United States, devoted his entire career to the introduction of Western dramaturgy and Chinese adaptation of Western plays.

²⁸⁵ Yu Shangyuan, “Xu” (Preface), *Guoju yundong* (National drama movement) (Shanghai: Xinyue shudian, 1927), 3.

²⁸⁶ Liang Shiqiu (1903-1987), essayist, literary theorist, translator; known for his advocacy of New Humanism under the influence of Irving Babbitt, as well as his contribution to the development of theories of literary criticism with regard to the May Fourth and New Culture literary tendencies.

his art. So far as the campaign for modern drama is concerned, there has been a big mistake, because Ibsen's thinking is captured, but not his dramatic art."²⁸⁷ This judgement went against Hu Shi's claim of "what we perceive in Ibsen is not an artist but a social reformer",²⁸⁸ signifying the rejection to a pragmatic perception in which the promotion of tragedy was "in essence a social campaign rather than a drama movement".²⁸⁹ Consequently, criticism of this kind showed the attempt of the aesthetic perspective to rectify the trend of the politicisation of literature by calling people's attention to the artistry of tragedy.

The aesthetic challenge to the pragmatic perception can be seen as part of the famous literary debate in the 1920s between two slogans with apparently opposite purposes of literary creativity, which was another point where the political and aesthetic viewpoints on the reading of *the tragic* competed with each other. These two slogans are by convention summarised as "literature for life" (*wei rensheng*) and "literature for art" (*wei yishu*); they are the respective guidelines of two different literary groups, namely, "The Literary Association" (*Wenxue yanjiu hui*)²⁹⁰ and "The Creation Society" (*Chuangzao she*)²⁹¹ that were founded in the early 1920s. To

²⁸⁷ Liang Shiqiu, "Xiandai wenxue lun" (On modern literature), first published in *Pianjian ji* (Collection of prejudices) (Nanjing: Zhengzhong shuju, 1934), reprinted in *Liang Shiqiu piping wenji* (Collection of critical essays of Liang Shiqiu), ed. Xu Jingbo (Zhuhai: Zhuhai chubanshe, 1998), 156-184. English translation taken from He Chengzhou, *Henrik Ibsen and Modern Chinese Drama* (Oslo: Unipub forlag, 2004), 159.

²⁸⁸ Hu Shi, "Lun yi xiju – fu T.F.C shu" (On translating drama – A response to the letter of T.F.C), *Xin qingnian* (New youth) 6, no. 3 (1919): 333.

²⁸⁹ Liang, "Xiandai wenxue lun" (On modern literature), 180.

²⁹⁰ One of the major literary groups in the 1920s which has made active contribution to the development of modern Chinese literature. Established in 1921 by some influential literary critics such as Zhou Zuoren, Zheng Zhenduo, Mao Dun, etc.; used to be the largest of its kind, and ceased to exist in 1932. See details in chapter 3 in *Literary Societies of Republican China*, eds. Kirk A. Denton, and Michel Hockx (New York: Lexington Books, 2008).

²⁹¹ One of the major literary groups in the 1920s which has engaged in the experiment of different trends in modern Chinese literary practice. Established in 1921 by some Chinese writers such as Guo Moruo, Yu Dafu, Tian Han, etc., who were then studying in Japan; plays a crucial role in the translation and introduction of foreign literary works in its early phase, and banned by the Nationalist government in 1929. See details in chapter 4 in *Literary Societies of Republican China*, eds. Kirk A. Denton, and Michel Hockx (New York: Lexington Books, 2008).

members of The Literary Association, “literature should be reflective of social phenomena; it presents and discusses certain general issues in human life.”²⁹² Consequently, they perceived tragedy in a functionalist approach to serve the purpose of a faithful demonstration of contemporary life for the in-depth examination of social problems. While to members of The Creation Society in its early phase, literary creativity should follow the authors’ “internal demands”,²⁹³ therefore, they advocated a straightforward way of tragic expression with “an emphasis on subjective, personal, and romantic sentiments”.²⁹⁴ These two opposite standpoints are in general regarded as roughly the distinction between realism and romanticism, whose intrinsic differences led to their respective tragic expressions in the 1920s.

However, this so-called antagonism was not at all absolute, because the romantic literary approach always voluntarily shared with the realist one an obvious thematic concern over the prevailing social issues. According to Zheng Boqi, despite its promotion of “literature for art”, The Creation Society was far from being considered as a genuine follower of “art for art’s sake” whose members often “hide in their ivory towers with hardly any attention to all concerns about the times and society”; rather, members of The Creation Society distinctly possessed keen awareness of social realities: “they are still ‘people of the times’ [*shidai er*] moaning under society’s shackles”.²⁹⁵ This can be exemplified by the explicit social implications in Yu Dafu’s sentimental works, which offer chances especially to some later scholarship to interpret his themes from a social realist perspective.

Scholars see in Yu’s works an image of a Chinese “superfluous man” (*lingyu zhe*) modelled after the Russian prototype created by Turgenev,²⁹⁶ and associate the

²⁹² Mao Dun, “Daoyan” (Introduction), *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi: xiaoshuo yiji* (Compendium of Chinese new literature: First volume on fiction), ed. Mao Dun (Shanghai: Liangyou tushu yinshua gongsi, 1935), 4.

²⁹³ Guo Moruo, “Bianji yutan” (A talk after editing), *Chuangzao jikan* (Creation quarterly) 1, no. 2 (1922): 21.

²⁹⁴ Li-hua Ying, *Historical Dictionary of Modern Chinese Literature* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 27.

²⁹⁵ Zheng Boqi, “Daoyan” (Introduction), *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi: xiaoshuo sanji* (Compendium of Chinese new literature: Third volume on fiction), ed. Zheng Boqi (Shanghai: Liangyou tushu yinshua gongsi, 1935), 8-9.

²⁹⁶ Lee, *Romantic Generation*, 89.

writer's personal experience of "a deep inferiority complex"²⁹⁷ to the socio-political background of 1920s China. They refer to Yu's own account as an example to show his dissatisfaction with "China's national impotence"²⁹⁸ through his works: "I saw my country sinking, while I myself suffered the humiliation of being a foreigner. Everything Yufu felt, thought, experienced, was essentially nothing but despair and suffering. Like a wife who had lost her husband, powerless, with no courage at all, bemoaning my fate, I felt out a tragic cry. This was [why I wrote] *Sinking* [...]"²⁹⁹ Accordingly, scholars hold that Yu's melancholy and sentimentality are "much derived from his deep concerns with the fate of his country and people";³⁰⁰ because his characters are tortured by either the dissatisfaction with "China's low international position",³⁰¹ or their frustration at their incapability³⁰² to help or rescue those "weaker and more powerless, often lower class characters".³⁰³ Therefore, this perspective distinguishes Yu Dafu from the conventional European romanticists, whose "subjectivist outlook [...] directs their attention to their own selves, rather than to other people and how they live, or to the prevalent social evils".³⁰⁴ Yu's short stories thus demonstrate the convergent features of the tragic narratives in the literary

²⁹⁷ Mau-sang Ng, *The Russian Hero in Modern Chinese Fiction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 92.

²⁹⁸ Denton, *Romantic Sentiment*, 378.

²⁹⁹ Yu Dafu, "Chan yu dubai" (Monologue after the confession), first published in *Beidou* (The dipper) 1, no. 4 (1931), reprinted in *Yu Dafu quanji, di shi juan, wenlun, shang* (Complete works of Yu Dafu, vol. 10, literary criticism, Part 1), ed. Wu Xiuming (Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2007), 499.

³⁰⁰ Fan, and Zhu, *1898-1949 Zhongwai wenxue bijiao shi* (History of Chinese and foreign comparative literature, 1898-1949), 368.

³⁰¹ Yu Dafu, "Xueye" (Snow night), *Yuzhou feng* (Cosmic wind) 1 (1936): 521.

³⁰² See, Fan, and Zhu, *1898-1949 Zhongwai wenxue bijiao shi* (History of Chinese and foreign comparative literature, 1898-1949), 363-364; and Denton, *Romantic Sentiment*, 382.

³⁰³ Denton, *Romantic Sentiment*, 382. Scholars use such short stories as *Chunfeng chenzui de wanshang* (Intoxicating spring night, 1923) (First published in *Chuangzao jikan* (Creation quarterly) 2, no. 2 (1924): 99-112.) and *Bodian* (A humble sacrifice, 1924) (First published in *Taipingyang* (The pacific) 4, no. 9 (1924).) to demonstrate this point. Both of the two short stories are told from the view of a poor intellectual about his witnessing of the underclass workers' miserable living condition in an indifferent society of injustice and exploitation.

³⁰⁴ Ng, *Russian Hero*, 92.

practice of the 1920s.

In fact, the slogan “literature for art” does not in essence go against the purpose of making literature as a social protest against the oppression from the old moral doctrines and foreign invasion. Taking The Creation Society as an example: despite the fact that the romantic influence has shaped its perception in pursuing the “perfection” and “beauty” of literature with objection to “any utilitarian aim”,³⁰⁵ The Creation Society can still demonstrate a down-to-earth literary vision as its emphasis upon lyricism and personal emotions is largely related to the conflict between the individual and the society. In this sense, members of The Creation Society share with their peers of The Literary Association the ultimate focus on social issues, which provide some possibilities for the conversion of some New Culture romanticists to the literary realist approach from the mid-1920s onward.³⁰⁶

Stated above, the boundary between realism and romanticism in the 1920s tragic narratives and critical reviews is quite blurred. Accordingly, later scholars suggest to approach the romantic tendency at this time as simply a literary impact rather than a school of literature³⁰⁷: “Modern China has no such a ‘romantic literature’ in its

³⁰⁵ Cheng Fangwu, “Xin wenxue de shiming” (The mission of new literature), *Chuangzao zhoubao* (Creation weekly), May 20 (1923): 5-6.

³⁰⁶ The Creation Society as a whole gradually turns its orientation towards a more realist stance, due to the increasing social imperatives and the introduction of Marxism. Among them the most significant figures are Tian Han and Guo Moruo. Yu Dafu also participates actively in anti-Japanese campaigns during his later phase of literary creativity, and thus expresses through his works an explicit sense of social criticism. See related analysis in Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937* (London: University of California Press, 2001), 122-123; Lee, “Quest for Modernity,” 475-476; Denton, *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, 56-57; and Ma Liangchun, and Zhang Daming, eds., *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sichao shi, shang* (The intellectual history of modern Chinese literature, Part 1) (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1995), 14.

³⁰⁷ See, Tian, *Zhongguo xiandai bijiao xiju shi* (History of modern Chinese comparative drama), 83; and Fan, and Zhu, *1898-1949 Zhongwai wenxue bijiao shi* (History of Chinese and foreign comparative literature, 1898-1949), 498-499.

genuine sense but only some romantic temperaments and life styles.”³⁰⁸ To them, the romantic features are less fully-developed and thus not strong enough to be clearly identified, which can be exemplified by the fact that there is hardly any particular foreign romantic writer with an impact equal to Ibsen’s on the formation of the realist tradition of modern Chinese literature. In this respect, the romantic reading and expression of *the tragic* in the New Culture period has inevitably merged with literary realism to a degree that made any attempt at aesthetic pursuit eventually, “in spite of itself, [more or less] a political statement”.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ Leo Ou-fan Lee quoted C.T. Hsia in Leo Ou-fan Lee, “Langman zhiyu” (Beside romanticism), in *Zhongxi wenxue de huaixiang* (Literary musings in Chinese and Western literatures) (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1986), 14.

³⁰⁹ Denton, *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, 54.

III The 1930s: The Deepening of Western Influence and the Politicisation of Literature (1928-1937)

The second phase of modern Chinese literature is usually known and referred to as “literature of the thirties” (*sanshi niandai wenxue*).³¹⁰ According to most of the existing scholarship, the opinions concerning the periodisation of this phase are less divergent than those of the previous period: generally speaking, the transition of the major theme of modern Chinese literature “from literary revolution to revolutionary literature” (*cong wenxue geming dao geming wenxue*)³¹¹ has been acknowledged as the watershed to mark the ending of the May Fourth and New Culture era, as well as the beginning of a new literary scene that was to last roughly for another ten years.

In regard to the specific time division, although scholars differ on the starting point of this period, there are certain events frequently mentioned with landmark significance: politically, the May Thirtieth Incident (*Wusa shijian*) in 1925 and the breakdown of the alliance between the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party in 1927 were seen as notable turning points for Chinese revolution with the rising of the proletariat;³¹² literarily, the emergence of the polemics on the essence of literature between two intellectual camps advocating proletarianism and liberalism in 1928 signalled the threshold of a closer engagement of modern Chinese literature with

³¹⁰ See, for example, Leo Ou-fan Lee, “Literary Trends: the Road to Revolution 1927-1949,” in *The Cambridge History of China vol. 13: Republican China 1912-1949, Part 2*, eds. John K. Fairbank, and Albert Feuerwerker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 421; Zhu Donglin, ed., *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shi 1917-2000, shang* (History of modern Chinese literature 1917-2000, Part 1) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2007), 120.

³¹¹ Cheng Fangwu, “Cong wenxue geming dao geming wenxue” (From literary revolution to revolutionary literature), first published in *Chuangzao yuekan* (Creation monthly) 1, no. 9 (1928), reprinted in “Geming wenxue” *lunzheng ziliao xuanbian, shang* (Collection of materials on the debate over “Revolutionary Literature”, Part 1) (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 97-102.

³¹² See, Lee, “Road to Revolution”, 422; Zhu Xiaojin, *Fei wenxue de shiji: ershi shiji Zhongguo wenxue yu zhengzhi wenhua guanxi shilun* (The century of non-literariness: Essays on the relationship between literature and political culture in 20th-century Chinese history) (Nanjing: Nanjing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2004), 71.

politics.³¹³ The main literary theme during this period was created by a literary camp which emerged after this debate, namely, the League of Left-Wing Writers (*Zuoyi zuojia lianmeng*),³¹⁴ whose intensive concern over the political role of literature had “dominated literary debates and publication outlets”³¹⁵ in the 1930s. This debate represented to a large extent the divergence between literary pragmatism and literary aestheticism, which overlaps the focus of this study in tracing the increasing impact of a realist approach on the formation of the literary discourse on tragedy. Therefore, in reference to “literature of the thirties”, this chapter will concentrate on literary discussions and writings produced from 1928 to 1937, when the polemics led to the triumph of a proletarian literary trend and thus had a noticeable influence on the Chinese definition of tragedy.

3.1 THEORETICAL DISCUSSION: THE MAKING OF A THEORY

A general survey of the literary discussions of tragedy in the 1930s shows a remarkable increase in the number of both the scholars and the theoretical works engaged in the interpretations of some basic concepts of tragedy: scholars such as Ouyang Yuqian, Hong Shen,³¹⁶ Ma Yanxiang,³¹⁷ Xiong Foxi, Zong Baihua,³¹⁸

³¹³ See, Qian Liqun, Wen Rumin, and Wu Fuhui, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshi nian* (Three decades in modern Chinese literature) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998), 191; and Joshua S. Mostow, ed., *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 293.

³¹⁴ An organisation of leftist writers founded in Shanghai on March 1930; also known as Left League (*Zuolian*). The major purpose was to promote proletarian art and socialist literature to support the ideological rivalry of the Communists against the Nationalist government. Used to be the largest literary group in the 1930s with its active engagement in a series of running debates; disbanded in 1936. See detailed discussions in Lee, “Road to Revolution,” 428-445; Qian, Wen, and Wu, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshi nian* (Three decades in modern Chinese literature), 191-201; and Zhu, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shi 1917-2000, shang* (History of modern Chinese literature 1917-2000, Part 1), 129-141.

³¹⁵ McDougall, and Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, 28.

³¹⁶ Hong Shen (1894-1955), playwright, drama theorist, film screenwriter, and director. One of the first several Chinese scholars to study dramaturgy and performing arts abroad; especially known for his important contribution to the development of modern Chinese theatre as one of the three founders (together with Ouyang Yuqian and Tian Han) of Chinese spoken drama (*huaaju*). See Chen Xiaomei, “Introduction,” in *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 5.

Xiang Peiliang, Zhang Min,³¹⁹ and Zhu Guangqian³²⁰ are in particular representative in this respect; a series of articles and books with specially-designed sections for the presentation of their research findings, such as *Shuyu de jieshi* (Interpretation of terms, 1929), *Xieju yuanli* (Principles of play-writing, 1933), *Beiju xinli xue* (The Psychology of Tragedy, 1933), and *Beiju lun* (On tragedy, 1936), have also enriched the theoretical construction. As these scholars and theoretical works frequently appear in the research of later literary historians and critics, this study will follow the same route to introduce them as the main part of the discussion, focusing upon summarising their main ideas as well as comparing them with their New Culture colleagues to seek out similarities and differences between their interpretations of the concept of tragedy.

3.1.1 The Rejection of Chinese Tragedy

The critique on the *Datanyuan* continued to draw much attention in the 1930s: Zhu Guanqian considered Chinese drama “almost a synonym for comedy”, as “[t]he Chinese play-wrights always stick to a happy ending in which the virtuous are rewarded and the wicked punished”³²¹. Qian Zhongshu³²² held that “[t]he highest dramatic art is of course tragedy and it is precisely in tragedy that our old

³¹⁷ Ma Yanxiang (1907-1988), drama theorist and activist, director. The student of Hong Shen; launched and participated in a series of national drama movements related to social and political situations during the 1930s and 1940s.

³¹⁸ Zong Baihua (1897-1986), philosopher, aesthetician; active participant in New Culture Movement. Received systematic training of philosophical studies in Germany; expert in Chinese aesthetics of experience (*tiyan meixue*).

³¹⁹ Zhang Min (1906-1975), theorist and educator of dramaturgy, director; one of the founders of the Left League campaign.

³²⁰ Zhu Guangqian (1897-1986), aesthetician, literary theorist and critic, translator; one of the pioneering forerunners for the foundation of aesthetic studies in 20th-century China. Most celebrated for his series of aesthetic monographs such as *Beiju xinli xue* (The Psychology of Tragedy), *Wenyi xinli xue* (The psychology of art), *Xifang meixue shi* (History of Western aesthetics) as well as translated works of Plato, Goethe, Hegel and Croce.

³²¹ Zhu, *The Psychology of Tragedy*, 208.

³²² Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998), writer, literary scholar, famous for his broad knowledge of both Chinese and Western literary traditions; well-established in the field of cross-cultural literary creativity and studies.

playwrights have to a man failed”.³²³ Ouyang Yuqian questioned the artistic value of what he defined as “tragicomedy” (*bei xi ju*), because such plays usually unexceptionally concluded the sad and miserable stories with happy endings; as a result, “the plot of a *Datanyuan* is often inappropriate to the whole play and seems to be poorly made-up”.³²⁴ Xiong Foxi, similarly, criticised a stereotypical happy reunion designed for the miseries and sadness in traditional Chinese plays, because “all the tragedies from the past have ‘unhappy’ endings, which provide them with great artistic value due to their thought-provoking effects and retrospective emotions aroused among the audience.”³²⁵ He referred to some Chinese dramas, such as *Taohua shan* (Peach blossom fan)³²⁶, *Pipa ji* (Tale of the pipa)³²⁷, *Zhaoshi guer* (The orphan of Zhao)³²⁸, and *Dou E yuan* (The injustice to Dou E)³²⁹, to demonstrate his argument that “China has not a single great tragedy”, because playwrights of those dramas “uphold the doctrine of the happy reunion which degrade their works of much artistic value”.³³⁰

Compared with the New Culture intellectuals, scholars in the 1930s concentrated more on questioning the artistic value of Chinese tragedies.³³¹ While the negation of the *Datanyuan* and then of the traditional Chinese drama still existed, the

³²³ Qian Zhongshu (Ch’ien Chung-shu), “Tragedy in Old Chinese Drama,” *T’ien Hsia Monthly* 1, no. 1 (1935): 38.

³²⁴ Ouyang Yuqian, “Xiju gaige zhi lilun yu shiji” (Theory and practice of drama reform), first published in *Xiju* (Drama) 1, no. 1 (1929), reprinted in *Ouyang Yuqian quanji, di si juan* (Complete works of Ouyang Yuqian, vol. 4) (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1990), 47.

³²⁵ Xiong Foxi, *Xieju yuanli* (Principles of play-writing) (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1933), 69.

³²⁶ A 44-scene play written by Kong Shangren (1648-1718) in early Qing dynasty.

³²⁷ A 42-scene play written by Gao Ming (1305-1371) in early Ming dynasty.

³²⁸ A five-act play written by Ji Junxiang (?-?) in Yuan dynasty.

³²⁹ A four-act play written by Guan Hanqing (1219-1301) in Yuan dynasty.

³³⁰ Xiong, *Xieju yuanli* (Principles of play-writing), 68-69.

³³¹ However, there was in the meantime a different voice trying to acknowledge some legitimacy in Chinese tragic literature. Ma Yanxiang held that it was the atmosphere not the ending that ultimately distinguished between tragedy and comedy, and accordingly suggested that some traditional Chinese dramas with happy-endings could still be recognised as tragedies, as long as they dissatisfied the audience in one aspect or two. See his illustrations in Ma Yanxiang, “Xiju zhi zhonglei” (The types of drama), *Xiju jiangzuo* (Lectures on drama) (Shanghai: Xiandai shuju, 1932), 61-63.

iconoclastic literary appeal which was distinctive in the New Culture period was no longer so palpable as to mandate the motivation of the scholarly discussions.

Meanwhile, some scholars went further to explore the reasons for the absence of tragic consciousness in Chinese literature, which had not been greatly discussed before. Both Zhu Guangqian and Qiang Zhongshu touched upon this subject through comparing the outlook of fate in Chinese and in ancient Greek cultures:

To Zhu, the Chinese were more likely to relate themselves to a concept of preordained destiny; thus, “[a] virtuous man who suffers from misfortune is always thought to have done something wrong in a previous state of existence. The blame is always laid on the victim himself and not on Fate.”³³² However, based on his knowledge of the ancient Greek tragedies, Zhu presumed that “[t]ragedy cannot exist without some sense of injustice about human destiny”; this explained why the Chinese “naturally do not feel very deeply about the tragic side of life”, because they tended to “refuse to recognize an injustice in sufferings and miseries at all”³³³.

Qian agreed with this judgment. He regarded it typical for the Chinese to adopt a worldview based on “the theory of metempsychosis”, which believed that “we either have owed scores in a previous life or will receive compensations in a future one”.³³⁴ To him, this mentality differentiated the “numerous old plays which end on the note of sadness” in Chinese literature “from real tragedies”,³³⁵ because “the [Chinese] playwrights have but an inadequate conception of the tragic flaw and conflict”³³⁶ compared with those of Ancient Greece. Both Zhu and Qian carried a cultural perspective in their rejection of Chinese tragedy; the introduction of the idea of fate into the discourse on tragedy was something new, which soon became popular with scholars of this period.

³³² Zhu, *Psychology of Tragedy*, 207.

³³³ Ibid., 208.

³³⁴ Qian, “Tragedy in Old Chinese Drama,” 45.

³³⁵ Ibid., 38.

³³⁶ Ibid., 43.

3.1.2 The Conceptualisation of Tragedy

Generally speaking, the continued conceptualisation of tragedy at this time started with the introduction of foreign theories and terms. This was not entirely new: in the 1920s, Xiong Foxi had already attempted to base his understanding of tragedy on Aristotle's definition, which was an early example of interpreting the concept of tragedy in the light of its European origin. Also, Bing Xin traced briefly the development of tragedy in European literary tradition with a wide reference to writers of tragedies from the ancient Greek times to the 20th century.³³⁷ Yet, the theoretical discussions of tragedy in the 1930s were different in a way that they were in most cases more substantial and more clearly based on reference to European sources, among which the Aristotelian definition was frequently mentioned.

1) The Interpretation of Aristotle's Definition

Scholars in the 1930s studied Aristotle's definition of tragedy by translating and focusing on some particular terms, such as *mofang* (imitation), *lianmin he kongbu* (pity and fear), *yanzhong* (seriousness), *dongzuo* (action), and *xuanxie* (purgation). Liang Shiqiu compared between the tragic ideas of Aristotle and Plato, regarded *mofang* (imitation) as "a reproduction of the faithful and ideal human life that is universally eternal"³³⁸: "the artistic imitation goes beyond the superficial appearance of things and represents their ultimate true nature; it is, to quote Goethe, 'the illusion of a higher reality'."³³⁹ Liang considered *mofang* the essence of tragedy's artistic attributes,³⁴⁰ which differed from the creeds of either realism or romanticism because it presented something "ideal and rational" rather than "practical and

³³⁷ See, Bing, "Zhongxi xiju zhi bijiao" (The comparison between Chinese and Western drama), 327-329.

³³⁸ Liang Shiqiu, "Yalishiduode de *Shixue*" (On Aristotle's Poetics), first published in *Langman de yu gudian de* (The romantic and the classic) (Shanghai: Xinyue shudian, 1927), reprinted in *Liang Shiqiu wenji, di yi juan, wenxue piping* (Collected works of Liang Shiqiu, vol. 1, literary criticism) (Xiamen: Lujiang chubanshe, 2002), 87.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

emotional”.³⁴¹ This is a divergent opinion from that of the New Culture period to associate the concept of tragedy with either the realist or romantic literary approaches.

Xiong Foxi distinguished between *mofang* (imitation) and *chaoxi* (copying) by examining these two concepts from the artistic point of view. To him, *chaoxi* “can only take the form but not the content of things”; therefore, *chaoxi* “is rigid and stylised”, while *mofang* “is flexible and creative”.³⁴² Xiong equated the imitation of life with artistic creation, because “the artistic form of life reveals life’s essence and thus can be distinguished from the dross of daily experience.”³⁴³ Therefore, he believed that the imitation of life was the ideal and creative one, as “life becomes more beautiful when being purified by the arts, and the arts can be accomplished by the injection of life’s vitality.”³⁴⁴

According to Ma Yanxiang, the concept of *lianmin he kongbu* (pity and fear)³⁴⁵ was “a result tragedy provided to the audience”.³⁴⁶ Zhu Guangqian regarded the stimulation of “pity and fear” as “a means of emotional relief”,³⁴⁷ and thus held that “[t]ragedy, more than other forms of poetry, represents the most intense life of exceptional human beings at the most critical moment of their life.”³⁴⁸ Furthermore, Zhu insisted that “the pity and fear of Tragedy and the pity and fear of actual life belong to two different orders of experiences”,³⁴⁹ showing his awareness of the differences between tragedy and mere sadness in daily life.

Zhang Min, on the other hand, questioned the applicability of this ancient

³⁴¹ Liang, “Yalishiduode de *Shixue*” (On Aristotle’s Poetics), 87-88.

³⁴² Xiong, *Xieju yuanli* (Principles of play-writing), 54-55.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁵ Here he used the English terms “pity and terror”.

³⁴⁶ Ma Yanxiang, “Xiju zhi zhonglei” (The types of drama), *Xiju jiangzuo* (Lectures on drama) (Shanghai: Xiandai shuju, 1932), 61.

³⁴⁷ Zhu, *Psychology of Tragedy*, 173.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

concept in modern times: to him, it was true and necessary for tragedy to arouse among the audience such emotions as pity and fear in ancient Greece, because the presentation of “mankind’s helpless struggles at the hand of Fate or God”, and “the surrender to the overwhelming forces with fear and self-pity”, were exactly what the rulers needed from tragedy at that time.³⁵⁰ However, in modern society people were already fully aware of their own strength and were attempting to make some use of it; “they do not succumb to anything, instead, they firmly believe in their resolution and ability to reform the society and the world.”³⁵¹ Consequently, “[nowadays] it is no longer necessary for tragedy to simulate fear since there is nothing to be afraid of”;³⁵² and people would turn their sympathy to a disdainful pity towards the tragic hero who only passively submitted to certain external forces. Tragedies of this kind, as claimed by Zhang, “are indeed not the most successful modern tragedies in terms of the artistic effects”; in this case, “Aristotle’s view of ‘pity and fear’ cannot be regarded as universally applicable for the art of tragedy.”³⁵³

In addition, scholars provided some sketchy discussions of a few other concepts of Aristotle’s definition of tragedy. Liang Shiqiu elaborated his understanding of what he termed as *yanzhong* (seriousness) by exploring the different nature and functions of tragedy and comedy. He concluded that the dramatic purpose of the former was more serious than that of the latter, because “tragedy is all about the imitation and realisation of the universally ideal reality”, while comedy sought for funny effects through the presentation of something ugly or absurd.³⁵⁴

Xiong Foxi defined *dongzuo* (action) as “the actions of life” (*rensheng de dongzuo*), and divided them into internal and external ones: “the former is something

³⁵⁰ Zhang Min, “Beiju lun” (On tragedy), first published by Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1936, reprinted in *Zhangmin wenji, di san juan* (Complete works of Zhang Min, vol. 3), ed. Xie Xiaojing (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2011), 119.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Liang, “Yalishiduode de *Shixue*” (On Aristotle’s Poetics), 91-92.

spiritual that can only be perceived by hearts, while the latter is something physical and can be seen by eyes”.³⁵⁵ According to Xiong, it was completely wrong to simply focus on the external actions, because they could only provide the audience with some sensory organ stimulation; the internal actions, on the contrary, could “reach deep into the souls of the audience with such emotional experiences as fluctuation of spirits, conflict of wills, relief of feelings, and confusion of mentalities”.³⁵⁶

Zhu Guangqian thought otherwise of “Aristotle’s dictum of ‘hamartia’ [tragic flaw]”, which attributed the misfortune of the tragic hero to “the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty”.³⁵⁷ He enumerated several dramatic elements that could be commonly seen in the plays of Shakespeare, Racine, or Ibsen – such as “[l]ove, jealousy, ambition, honour, anger, revenge, inner conflict, and social problems” – to argue that in modern tragedy the driving force of the play had shifted “from the larger cosmological issues to the mind of man”. Therefore, Zhu suggested to apply “hamartia” in modern tragedy “with certain large reservations”, as “[m]an is now more a free agent than a puppet of the blind Fate” and “consequently [...] assumes an increasingly greater responsibility for his own actions and passions”.³⁵⁸

The introduction of Aristotle’s definition of tragedy in the 1930s mainly focused upon the artistic nature of tragedy, concerning with tragedy’s means of expression (through “imitation”), emotional effects (as “pity and fear”), and theme (of something serious and profound in man’s spiritual world). Meanwhile, a critical evaluation of the applicability of Aristotelian theory in modern times was also visible. Zhang Min and Zhu Guangqian provided some counterexamples against the portrayal of tragic figures as the helpless victims. They argued for the increasing autonomy of man against those external forces that restricted him, indicating their awareness to examine the foreign theories in light of the changing times and literary

³⁵⁵ Xiong, *Xieju yuanli* (Principles of play-writing), 56.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 23.

³⁵⁸ Zhu, *Psychology of Tragedy*, 100-101.

context of modern China.

2) The Function of Tragedy

The discussion of the function of tragedy initially went hand in hand with the interpretation of the Aristotelian term “purgation” (*xuanxie*), which was at first perceived by some scholars as an emotional effect of tragedy. Liang Shiqiu referred to *xuanxie* as the essence of artistic task, and therefore explained Aristotle’s definition as “containing both ethical and artistic elements”³⁵⁹ in terms of its emphasis upon tragedy’s capability to “amuse the audience with a necessary cause of moral judgement” (*lunli de caipan*).³⁶⁰ In other words, Liang held that the usefulness of tragedy lay not merely in certain emotions it aroused among the audience, but more importantly in the process of cleansing when those emotions were stimulated, released, and finally healed through watching tragedies: “tragedy [...] extricates people from the heavy emotional burden, making them more conscious and strong-minded.”³⁶¹

Xiong Foxi provided three different meanings for *xuanxie*: medically, it was a psychological or physical treatment; religiously, it was an emotional relief; and morally, it was a cultivated sense of justice. He suggested to understand this word as the “purgation of passions”,³⁶² which was based on his observation of the emotional experience upon watching tragedies: “there are times when we shed tears upon seeing tragedies of extremely miserable plots; however, our hearts are filled not with pain but instead with a sense of unspeakable joy – why is that?”³⁶³ This question pointed to the core matter of tragedy’s emotional function from the reader-response perspective, and received several answers with different focuses from the contemporary scholars:

³⁵⁹ Liang, “Yalishiduode de *Shixue*” (On Aristotle’s Poetics), 88-89.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 89.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Xiong, *Xieju yuanli* (Principles of play-writing), 58. He used the English words here.

³⁶³ Ibid., 57.

Zong Baihua referred to the emotional release offered by tragedy as its “beauty” (*mei*), because people could “feel a sense of comfort and relief besides the miserable experience”.³⁶⁴ He further explained how the miserable and joyful experience worked on the audience: the former related to the sympathy people showed towards the tragic hero who was suffering from a setback – “the more frustration he is confronted with, the more grief it will stimulate among the audience due to the greatness they find in him”; the latter aroused from witnessing the tragic hero’s choice of death to free himself from the spiritual or physical tortures. As Zong explained, “tragedy of this kind is capable of presenting life’s complexity and hardships which easily attract people with its focus upon the internal facets of human existence”.³⁶⁵ Therefore, to Zong, the function of tragedy lay mostly in its offering of the “opportunity to rediscover life’s in-depth conflicts out of the ordinary daily experience”, because “the true essence of human existence is the everlasting struggle for the realisation of a value beyond life; it may bring a destruction to life during this process, but at the same time also an emotional release as delight and nirvana.”³⁶⁶

Li Anzhai gave an unusual explanation of why tragedy seemed appealing to people. Referring to some foreign scholarship (yet without direct references), Li explained this appeal as a “sadistic” mentality (upon seeing others’ misfortunes), or a “masochistic” mentality (the empathy and co-experiences of others painful sufferings), or the “distance of safety” (from the real mental or physical suffering). He also explained the “unusual beauty” in certain fine tragedies: “[it is] a mentality of perfection [*yuanman xinli*] to harmonise all those emotional conflicts that are not easy to reconcile – a process through which a new ‘unity’ [*zheng*] and ‘wholeness’

³⁶⁴ Zong Baihua, “Yishu xue” (A study on arts), in *Zong Baihua quanji, di yi juan* (Complete works of Zong Baihua, vol. 1) (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 1994), 531-532.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 533-534.

³⁶⁶ Zong Baihua, “Beiju de yu youmo de rensheng taidu” (The tragic and the humorous attitudes of life), first published in *Zhongguo wenxue* (Chinese literature) 1, no. 1 (1934), reprinted in *Zong Baihua quanji, di er juan* (Complete works of Zong Baihua, vol. 2) (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 1994), 66-67.

[*quan*] is created”.³⁶⁷ To Li, the function of tragedy was the cultivation of an ideal life style which was neither self-indulgent (*fangren*) nor self-oppressive (*yizhi*):

The benefit of watching tragedies is that one can share with the tragic heroes the same experience without the need to have actually undergone those tragic events; [by doing this people can] build up an attitude of following the categorical imperative³⁶⁸ of one’s conscience that is motivated by one’s own inner desires rather than being subjected to the external constraints.³⁶⁹

Zhu Guangqian regarded this emotional experience as a “tragic pleasure”: “The pain in Tragedy is felt and expressed, and as it is felt and expressed, its pent-up energy is discharged and relieved. The relief of this pent-up energy means not only the removal of high tension, but also the awakening of a feeling of vitality. So it gives rise to pleasure.”³⁷⁰ Zhu examined tragedy’s function from the perspective of spiritual uplift of mankind, which was “denied to him in the actual world of compromise of mediocrity”³⁷¹: “Tragedy, in a word, transports us from the actual world of ordinary experiences to an ideal world of great actions and strong passions, and thus cures us of the nausea of sordidness and mediocrity which our daily routine constantly produces in us.”³⁷²

Qian Zhongshu based his elaboration of tragedy’s emotional effects mainly upon the critique of traditional Chinese dramas. After having established that Chinese tragedies did not exist, Qian compared between “Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* and Dryden’s *All for Love*” with “Pei Jen-fu’s *Rain in the Oil Trees* [Wutong yu³⁷³] and Hung Shen’s *The Palace of Everlasting Life* [Changsheng dian³⁷⁴]” (yet without explaining why he chose them). To him, these two Chinese

³⁶⁷ Li Anzhai, “Mei de fanchou yu beiju” (The domain of beauty and the tragedy), first published in *Meixue* (The aesthetics) (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1934), reprinted in *Zhongguo xiandai meixue congbian (1919-1949)* (Modern Chinese aesthetics, 1919-1949), ed. Hu Jingzhi (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1987), 54-55.

³⁶⁸ He used the English words here.

³⁶⁹ Li, “Mei de fanchou yu beiju” (The domain of beauty and the tragedy), 57.

³⁷⁰ Zhu, *Psychology of Tragedy*, 163-164.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 188.

³⁷³ A four-act play written by Bai Pu (1226-1306) in Yuan dynasty.

³⁷⁴ A 50-scene play written by Hong Sheng (1645-1704) in early Qing dynasty.

dramas were not tragedies, because they were unable to uplift the audience to any higher level of emotional experience beyond sympathy – “the tragic characters [...] are not great enough to keep us at a sufficient psychical distance from them.”³⁷⁵ Here, Qian shared the same opinion with Zhu Guangqian in suggesting tragedy to be “‘distanced’ and ‘filtered’ through the medium of art”,³⁷⁶ as “[m]oral sympathy often destroys distance and so spoils the effect of tragedy”.³⁷⁷ In this regard, Qian referred to the two well-celebrated Chinese tragedies – *Zhaoshi guer* (The orphan of Zhao) and *Dou E yuan* (The injustice to Dou E) – as examples. According to Qian, the emotional effects of these two plays were largely weakened by either the “characteristic poetic justice in the last act [of *Dou E yuan*]”, or the unequal strength between the “competing forces” that led to the self-division of the protagonist Cheng Ying in *Zhaoshi guer*.³⁷⁸ Consequently, Chinese dramas of this kind, as Qian claimed, needed to be separated from those “real tragedies”, because they failed to provide the audience “with the calm born of spent passions or what Spinoza calls *acquiescentia* with the workings of an immanent destiny”.³⁷⁹

The above discussions concentrated on the emotional function of tragedy; they explored the role certain sentiments played in helping the audience with either the transformation of daily ordinariness through artistic activities (as stated by Zhu Guangqian and Qian Zhongshu), or the cultivation of a positive attitude of life (as advocated by Zong Baihua and Li Anzhai).

In the meantime, another perspective highlighted tragedy’s function for the enlightenment of society. Ouyang Yuqian basically followed the New Culture trend to promote a dramatic art presenting faithfully daily life and social reality: “theatre mirrors and is determined by the society”.³⁸⁰ According to Ouyang, theatre reflected

³⁷⁵ Qian, “Tragedy in Old Chinese Drama,” 38-39.

³⁷⁶ Zhu, *Psychology of Tragedy*, 39.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁷⁸ Qian, “Tragedy in Old Chinese Drama,” 41-43.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁸⁰ Ouyang, “Xiju gaige zhi lilun yu shiji” (Theory and practice of drama reform), 20.

the society in a way that it helped to reconstruct and reradiate the true image of the world during the process of representation, thus enabled people to know life and themselves better by providing new driving forces for their development – “this is the true mission for theatre”.³⁸¹ Therefore, he advocated “a new kind of drama [tragedy] that did not satisfy itself solely with recreation”,³⁸² since “the old dramatic form is no longer capable of conveying the feelings and thoughts of modern people”.³⁸³

Xiong Foxi directed his interpretation of tragedy’s function to the Chinese literary and social realities in the 1930s. Tragedy, as he claimed, was the most solemn artistic form of poetry, because it could stimulate people’s consciousness of respect and sympathy: “We cannot help feeling empathetic towards those tragic heroes when watching Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Ibsen’s *Ghosts*; we are more likely to experience a sense of awe out of pity when seeing Yue Fei³⁸⁴ being backstabbed in return for his loyalty to the country.”³⁸⁵ However, emotions of this kind were lacking in China as “a country where a pestilential atmosphere of coldness and gloominess prevails”: “Look at the present China! Where exactly were sympathy and respect?”³⁸⁶ Consequently, Xiong regarded tragedy as primarily a wake-up call to the whole nation: “we should brook no delay in raising the promotion of the art of tragedy, if we want a silver lining and the drop of a sympathetic tear to be found in China.”³⁸⁷

Zhang Min also saw tragedy as the reflection of social reality; he elaborated this point through the discussion of the relationship between the writer and his works. In his opinion, the origin of tragedy came from various kinds of “tragic realities” (*beiju*

³⁸¹ Ouyang, “Xiju gaige zhi lilun yu shiji” (Theory and practice of drama reform), 22.

³⁸² Ibid., 23.

³⁸³ Ibid., 43.

³⁸⁴ Yue Fei (1103-1142), a Chinese military general and national folk hero in Southern Song dynasty. Famous for his bravery in the war between Southern Song and Jin tribes. Despite great contributions to defend his country, Yue Fei was set up under false charges and put to death by the Southern Song government.

³⁸⁵ Xiong, *Xieju yuanli* (Principles of play-writing), 70-71.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 71.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

de xianshi) in “human social activities from the very beginning of primitive society to the civilised societies of nowadays”;³⁸⁸ hence, “tragedy was not a mere creation of the playwrights’ subjective will, but a reflection of the emotions and lives of those living in the actual scenes of tragic realities”.³⁸⁹ To Zhang, drama needed to interact with the audience and to stimulate certain emotions among them in order to achieve its dramatic effects: “The solemnity [*yansu xing*] in tragedy’s theme produces a serious attitude, which is one of the most important features distinguishing tragedy from other dramatic forms. Sympathy [*tongqing xing*] is also one of the emotions stimulated by tragedy; in fact, it can be found in tragedies of all ages with its contents varying according to the changing of times.”³⁹⁰ Based on this point of view, Zhang further emphasised the playwrights’ responsibility to ensure that those emotions and thoughts they were trying to convey had certain universal meanings, because “the more profound sympathy a tragedy is able to stimulate, the higher its value and the better its effects get exerted”.³⁹¹

The interpretation of tragedy’s function at this time can basically be grouped into two types with distinctive focuses: the aesthetic perspective concerned with the relationship between tragedy and emotional release, and the pragmatic perceptive concentrated on the relationship between tragedy and social reality. However, these two perspectives were not exclusively confined to any particular groups of scholars; to be exact, it was not unusual for some “social realists” to also recognise certain aesthetic or philosophical features in the art of tragedy.

For example, Ouyang Yuqian, although not directly quoting Aristotle, acknowledged that “[t]he emotional experience of watching a tragedy involved both pity [*lianmin*] and fear [*kongju*]”: “the former is the sympathy for the miserable circumstances the protagonist encounters, the latter is the empathy for the same

³⁸⁸ Zhang, “Beiju lun” (On tragedy), 101.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 102.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 105.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 106-108.

situation falling upon the audience themselves. These emotions are extremely noble as it produces all the peace and comfort in the world.”³⁹² Apart from insisting on the faithful presentation of social reality, Ouyang also considered the capability to “purify the spirit” (*shi jingshen jinghua*) as one aspect of tragedy’s function, hence the writer’s role in artistic creativity: “The rich compassion provides an artist with both his title and the value of his works, which lies in the profound emotions he is able to evoke.”³⁹³

Xiong Foxi shared a similar viewpoint. He held that “[w]e would easily sympathise with those characters in past great Western tragedies, whose good intentions were repaid by evil results; we would also easily be afraid of encountering the same miseries, especially when this empathy extends to the entire human race.”³⁹⁴ But Xiong tried to associate this emotional effect with some traditional Chinese ideas of morality: he perceived tragedy “from a moral perspective” (*daode de yanguang*), considering it to be functioning in a way which could cultivate the audience in the senses of justice (*zhengyi*) and conscience (*liangxin*) through a method called “like cures like” (*yi du gong du*): “the more conscience being cultivated, the stronger and healthier these emotions could be; and the sense of justice would also be reinforced during this process.”³⁹⁵

Generally speaking, compared with the discussions by Hu Shi and Lu Yin in the 1920s, tragedy’s function received more attention among scholars in the 1930s. Certain topics which were roughly touched upon in the previous discussions, such as the emotional effect, the role in social enlightenment, and the writer’s responsibility, were further elaborated at this time. Furthermore, the aesthetic perspective that focused upon the literary and artistic elements of tragedy was more obvious and systematically developed than that of the 1920s; even certain pragmatic views

³⁹² Ouyang, “Xiju gaige zhi lilun yu shiji” (Theory and practice of drama reform), 44.

³⁹³ Ibid., 44-45.

³⁹⁴ Xiong, *Xieju yuanli* (Principles of play-writing), 60.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 60-61.

offered an aesthetic reading of the emotional function of tragedy, showing the popularity of the latter among scholars during this period.

3) Tragic Conflict

The discussion of tragic conflict concerned the attempts to categorise tragedies according to the way tragic conflicts were presented. One kind of classification was based on the difference between Shakespearean tragedies and ancient Greek tragedies. Qian Zhongshu differentiated these two types according to their different focuses of tragic conflict: “In the first, the interest tends to be centered on character. In the second, Fate itself draws the attention.”³⁹⁶ Li Anzhai described the former as the presentation of “man’s reaction against the hostile environment” and the latter “the overwhelming external circumstances or fate”, and further concluded their thematic concerns as those “making goodness out of misfortune” and those “making pleasure out of bitterness”.³⁹⁷

The other kind of classification, apart from distinguishing between Shakespearean tragedies and ancient Greek tragedies, went further to suggest a third type of tragedy. To Zong Baihua, tragic conflict was “the presentation of two competing forces with one being defeated in the end”;³⁹⁸ he divided these competing forces into three types as man versus fate, the inward struggles of man, and the confrontation between man and the environment. Accordingly, the defeat of one side – usually man – also fell into three types: “the unwanted yet unavoidable death (which is typical for Ibsen’s plays), the mental breakdown and being rejected of an immediate death (which intensifies the pain), as well as the destruction of both the body and the soul”.³⁹⁹

Ouyang Yuqian, similarly, developed three types of tragedies as *mingyun beiju* (tragedy of fate), *xingge beiju* (tragedy of character), and *jingyu beiju* (situation

³⁹⁶ Qian, “Tragedy in Old Chinese Drama,” 43.

³⁹⁷ Li, “Mei de fanchou yu beiju” (The domain of beauty and the tragedy), 55-56.

³⁹⁸ Zong, “Yishu xue” (A study on arts), 532.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 533.

tragedy)⁴⁰⁰ based on their different natures of tragic conflict. He saw an evolutionary development among the three: the “tragedy of fate” presenting the “fight between human will and fate” was most represented in ancient tragedies, when “the fragility of life faces nothing but a doomed destruction” in front of “the ultimate power and authority of fate”; as a result, “tragedy of this kind always ends in despair.”⁴⁰¹ However, “as fate cannot be always dominant in man’s life, a strong determination will eventually make man conquer nature.”⁴⁰² Thus, the “tragedy of character” emerged to “ascribe the protagonist’s failure to his own character flaws”.⁴⁰³ The modern tragedy, on the other hand, was produced mostly by the “conflicts between human desire and the external environment”, because “the evolution of civilisation has strengthened man’s power but at the same time accumulated the conformist traditions of the society”; therefore, modern tragedy presented “man’s ceaseless but unsuccessful attempts to transform the outside world”.⁴⁰⁴

Ma Yanxiang promoted the same categorisation and further illustrated his opinions with some specific examples. He regarded the Greek tragedy *Oedipus the King* as “one of the best tragedies of fate”,⁴⁰⁵ because it presented the powerlessness of man before the god of fate: “man is neither intelligent enough to make judgements towards fate, nor capable of discriminating good from bad; there is simply nothing he can do except to obey.”⁴⁰⁶ Ma saw certain features of a “tragedy of character” in the Greek tragedy *Medea* and most of the plays written by the Roman tragedian Seneca, as well as in Shakespeare’s time when “this kind of tragedy has finally reached it maturity”: “In his [Shakespeare’s] play [here he used *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Hamlet* as examples], the tragic hero suffers great pain only due to

⁴⁰⁰ Ouyang, “Xiju gaige zhi lilun yu shiji” (Theory and practice of drama reform), 45.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 44-45.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 45.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 44-45.

⁴⁰⁵ Ma, “Xiju zhi zhonglei” (The types of drama), 65.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 68.

his reckless action driven accidentally by certain defects in his character, which is totally absent in Greek tragedy”.⁴⁰⁷ As for the “situation tragedy”, Ma considered it a product of the modern times, when man’s desire for greater progress was manipulated by the environment he depended on: “man has to fight against the society and the environment; and tragedy comes from the failure of his struggle.”⁴⁰⁸ Most of Ibsen’s plays, according to Ma, belonged to this category.

With regard to the similarities to and differences from the previous period, the understanding of tragic conflict in the 1930s was further deepened in a way that some new aspects such as “fate”, “character”, and “environment” were introduced into the discussions. In the 1920s, the concept of conflict was almost solely associated with the character’s internal struggle; while to scholars in the 1930s, tragic conflict remained one of the central elements in tragedy, but the causal factors came from a wider range of either some internal or external forces. Also, the differentiation among tragic conflicts was placed in the context of the history of tragedy, as scholars at this time frequently referred their categorisations to certain European tragedies from different developing stages, showing an evolutionary view in understanding the various forms of tragic conflict.

4) Tragic Hero

The characterisation of tragic hero (*beiju yingxiong*) received constant attention in the 1930s; scholars based their understandings on, but not limited to, Aristotle’s viewpoint and thus came up with different conclusions. Liang Shiqiu followed Aristotle’s statement that a tragic hero needed to be portrayed between “two extremes” of either a virtuous or a bad man,⁴⁰⁹ and suggested that the most ideal tragic hero was one who possessed neither a “purely good” nor “purely evil” human

⁴⁰⁷ Ma, “Xiju zhi zhonglei” (The types of drama), 68-69.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 70.

⁴⁰⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 23.

nature that made him “in essence an average man like us”.⁴¹⁰ In addition, Liang held that the tragic hero should be at the same time someone with rich emotions and strong determination, as it was the contrast between “the greatness of his fighting force” (*weida de fendou li*) and “the sadness of his destined end” that created a tragedy: “the more illustrious the person is, the more tragic it appears when he falls.”⁴¹¹

Ma Yanxiang focused upon the “greatness” (*weida*) of the tragic hero. He examined tragedies of ancient Greece and the Middle Ages with such tragic heroes as either emperors or gods, and claimed that “in tragedy no one is not great”.⁴¹² Here, he followed Aristotle’s viewpoint in regarding the tragic hero as one with noble status. On the other hand, Ma held that there must be something extraordinary in those tragic heroes since they were able to evoke emotional response among the audience with their dauntless persistence to fight against the fate; and he did not consider it necessary for those characters to be “historically or religiously well-known” as long as they were “offering some possibilities to be regarded as ‘great’ at least in certain respects of human nature, emotion, or personality”.⁴¹³ In other words, Ma advocated a noble character for the tragic hero. Therefore, his viewpoint of “greatness” had a dual meaning.

Meanwhile, some scholars argued for a change of the Aristotelian principles. Zhang Min briefly compared the characters of the tragic hero in the Greek tragedies of Euripides and his two seniors Aeschylus and Sophocles, and commended the former’s inclusion of some daily life experience into the themes of tragedy. Therefore, he questioned the applicability of Aristotle’s definition in modern times, because “everyone can be a tragic hero as the tragedy of our age comes mainly from our daily

⁴¹⁰ Liang, “Yalishiduode de *Shixue*” (On Aristotle’s Poetics), 94.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ma Yanxiang, *Xiju gailun* (A general introduction to drama) (Shanghai: Guanghai shuju, 1929), 25.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 26.

life”.⁴¹⁴

Zong Baihua regarded the tragic hero as someone of “extraordinary talent” (*feifan de caiqi*) in order to “easily evoke sympathy” among the audience.⁴¹⁵ But he did not agree to limit this kind of character only to one type of person: “In the past the tragic heroes were most likely to be those of high social status and prestige [*weigao dechong*], but nowadays they just need to carry with them one or two such features, for instance, as experiencing a profound and unusual love affair, having an excellent ability, being cowardly, suspicious, or oversensitive.”⁴¹⁶

Xiong Foxi claimed that it mattered not whether the tragic hero was good or evil in terms of human nature, but how he was treated in the plays:

It may be of certain rationality to depict a tragic hero as one of great renown and influence [*shengshi xuanhe*] in ancient times to appeal for certain universal significance; however, this principle seems no longer appropriate in modern times. The tragic hero can be either an emperor or a beggar; what matters most is not the ranking of his social position, but how fierce his inner conflicts are.⁴¹⁷

This opinion was similar to Zhu Guangqian’s emphasis on “[u]ne grandeur d’âme [the greatness of the soul]” as “the essential thing in Tragedy [...] from the aesthetic point of view”, regardless of “whether that grandeur is exhibited by a virtuous man or a villain”.⁴¹⁸

Xiang Peiliang, on the other hand, held that tragedy should enable the audience to see through the surface phenomena to perceive the internal causes of those miserable things in the world. Consequently, to Xiang, it did not matter whether the tragic hero was a nobleman, “since his failure is produced by either an active resistance or a passive endurance to his predicament – the former makes him the most appropriate as a tragic hero, while the latter provides a more profound tragic sense through an

⁴¹⁴ Zhang, “Beiju lun” (On tragedy), 118.

⁴¹⁵ Zong, “Yishu xue” (A study on arts), 532.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Xiong, *Xieju yuanli* (Principles of play-writing), 63.

⁴¹⁸ Zhu, *Psychology of Tragedy*, 94.

in-depth exploration of the factors preventing him from taking any actions.”⁴¹⁹

If taking a closer look at Bing Xin’s advocacy of a “noble” tragic hero in the 1920s, it is clear that what she referred to was the greatness of the character rather than to the nobility of the social status, as she greatly valued the individual free will and encouraged the common people to be tragic heroes in order to acquire that trait. In this sense, the discussions of the 1930s inherited Bing Xin’s standpoint in terms of their emphasis on tragedy’s concern over people’s secular daily experience. Also, an evolutionary view was observable. Ma Yanxiang, for instance, suggested that the tragic hero could either be a single person or a group of people, or a social class or a system, because “there is such a tendency for dramas after Shakespeare to somewhat render invisible the tragic hero, and tragedy is instead produced by the conflicts among different groups of people, or between human beings and the environment.”⁴²⁰ In this regard, the challenge to Aristotle’s theories from a modern point of view mentioned above also exemplified this evolutionary view.

5) The Subject Matter of Tragedy

The discussion of tragedy’s subject matter in the 1930s mainly centred on two aspects with regard to man’s reaction towards his unfortunate circumstances, which had not been touched upon in the 1920s. One aspect was the spirit of resistance. Zhu Guangqian observed in tragedy a sense of “admiration” in addition to Aristotle’s “list of tragic emotions”, and thus proposed to understand tragedy as “a sub-species of the sublime [...] of fear-inspiring but uplifting power”.⁴²¹ He highlighted such an optimistic effect produced by man’s resistance, regarding the essence of tragedy as the “heroic grandeur” which inspired “in us a feeling of vitality and a sense of strenuous effort”⁴²²: “There is not actual tragedy, [...] if such suffering falls upon a person of weak nature, who accepts it with mere wretched submissiveness. It is

⁴¹⁹ Xiang Peiliang, *Juben lun* (Discussion on script) (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1936), 52.

⁴²⁰ Ma, “Xiju zhi zhonglei” (The types of drama), 72-73.

⁴²¹ Zhu, *Psychology of Tragedy*, 89.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 200.

present only when there is something of greatness and struggle in him, even if it should be only a momentary energy or inspiration of feeling and expression, carrying him beyond and above himself.”⁴²³

Xiang Peiliang, similarly, thought it was not enough for a tragedy to merely present a sad situation. He considered the “main property” of tragedy as “one kind of ideal” (*yizong lixiang*), and suggested that tragedy “mirrors the unfruitful attempt [of man] to strive for the ideal”, in which “the desire of exceeding one’s limit is the factor that drives human nature into ceaseless inner struggles”.⁴²⁴

Zong Baihua regarded the “eternal struggle” (*yongyuan de fendou*) as life’s true essence. To him, the tragic destruction helped to reveal the significance of life which man would make sacrifices for. Therefore, tragedy presented an attitude towards life, which was “to acknowledge the conflicts, to sacrifice in order to overcome the conflicts, and to search for the meaning of life as well as the realisation of life’s value from a sense of emptiness and destruction”.⁴²⁵

The other aspect was the doomed defeat of man regardless of his resistance. Hong Shen saw tragedy as “a cry of sympathy for those defects and pains in human life”.⁴²⁶ To him, tragedy presented “a noble person or a great deed facing its unexpected but destined failure”; therefore, it could arouse among the audience “a sense of sympathy and lament wishing things had not happened like this.”⁴²⁷

Ma Yanxiang based his arguments on the examination of the developing understanding of tragedy in European literary tradition, and concluded that tragedy described “a person with noble character striving to fight against the fate”.⁴²⁸ He emphasised in particular the “undeserved but doomed” failure of the tragic hero’s

⁴²³ Zhu, *Psychology of Tragedy*, 197.

⁴²⁴ Xiang, *Juben lun* (Discussion on script), 51.

⁴²⁵ Zong, “Beiju de yu youmo de rensheng taidu” (The tragic and the humorous attitudes of life), 67.

⁴²⁶ Hong Shen, “Shuyu de jieshi” (Interpretation of terms), first published in *Minguo ribao, xiju zhoukan* (Republican daily news, Drama weekly), 1929, reprinted in *Hongshen xiju lunwen ji* (Collected essays on drama of Hongshen) (Shanghai: Dongfang chubun zhongxin, 2011), 14.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Ma, “Xiju zhi zhonglei” (The types of drama), 64-65.

struggle so as to provoke sympathy among the audience; therefore, to him, tragedy “is all about the presentation of man’s failure in his struggle for existence”.⁴²⁹

Lu Xun also developed his understanding of this subject, which can be somewhat seen as an explanation of his opinion in the 1920s. After stating the thematic concern of tragedy as the destruction of the valuable things in life, Lu Xun explained what he called “tragedies almost devoid of incident” (*jihu wushi de beiju*): “These extremely commonplace tragedies, some of them almost entirely devoid of incident, like speech without words, are hard to detect unless described by poets. Yet few men perish in heroic, remarkable tragedies, whereas many fritter their lives away in extremely commonplace tragedies almost entirely devoid of incident.”⁴³⁰ Here, he emphasised the profane or secular feature of tragedy, indicating tragedy’s focus on common people’s daily experience – which he saw as valuable; consequently, those common things were destroyed in a way that was soundless and unnoticed – which he saw as tragic.

3.1.3 Summary

Generally speaking, compared with the previous period, the Chinese understanding of the concept of tragedy in the 1930s was remarkably distinctive in terms of both the breadth and profundity of its theoretical discussions. Most intellectuals in the 1920s who talked about tragedy were not themselves specialised in literary studies (such as Hu Shi or Fu Sinian), and could thus only acquire a vague and fragmented understanding of this term. However, scholars in the 1930s aimed at a more systematic and consistent theoretical construction, mostly via direct translations from and references to European theories. As a result, the academic research at this time was both quantitatively productive and qualitatively structuralised.

⁴²⁹ Ma, “Xiju zhi zhonglei” (The types of drama), 64-65.

⁴³⁰ Lu Xun, “Jihu wushi de beiju” (Tragedies Almost Devoid of Incident), first published in *Wenxue* (Literature) 5, no. 2 (1935), reprinted in *Lu Xun quanji, di liu juan* (Complete works of Lu Xun, vol. 6) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 383. English translation taken from *Lu Xun, Selected Works, vol. 4*, trans. Yang Xianyi, and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980), 211.

One significant change in the perception of tragedy at this time was that tragedy was less concerned as an ideological weapon than it used to be in the 1920s; in other words, scholars in the 1930s concentrated more on exploring the intrinsic meaning or function of tragedy, rather than including it primarily in a counter-tradition political project. This change can be exemplified by the critique on the *Datanyuan*: while intellectuals in the 1920s targeted the existing literary tradition as the obstacle for an overall revolution, scholars in the 1930s were concerned with the cultural-ideological reasons for the absence of Chinese tragedies.

Another particular feature of the theoretical discussions was the introduction of Aristotle's definition of tragedy. Scholars engaged with this subject brought such terms as "pity and fear", "purgation", and "imitation" into intellectual debate, offering new aspects for the formation of the discourse on tragedy. Furthermore, the interpretation of Aristotle's theories went hand in hand with a critical evaluation of its applicability to modern times, making the reception of the concept of tragedy more relevant to the Chinese literary context.

The two perspectives of literary utilitarianism and literary aestheticism remained visible at this time, as there existed both a pragmatic concern over tragedy's faithful presentation of social reality (advocated by Ouyang Yuqian, Xiong Foxi, and Zhang Min), and an aesthetic interest in tragedy's sublimation or idealisation of daily experience through artistic expressions (promoted by Zhu Guangqian, Zong Baihua, and Li Anzhai). Similar to the previous period, these two perspectives overlapped at a certain point to acknowledge the emotional effects of tragedy and its spiritual benefit to the audience. But the aesthetic reading did not seem to be greatly affected by the utilitarian viewpoint. That is to say, compared with in the 1920s, the perspective of literary realism appeared less prominently in the construction of the discourse on tragedy in the 1930s; therefore, this situation offered more space for the growth of a non-political perspective either exploring the aesthetic attributes of tragedy or investigating the typical Chinese cultural mentality.

The development of literary aestheticism in the 1930s was momentous, as a detailed examination of the theoretical discussions reveals that the discourse on tragedy was not completely in tune with the main literary trend at this time. Due to the leftists' growing political concern with the role of literature in a broader social context, some current Chinese scholarship divides those intellectuals who discussed tragedy in the 1930s according to their membership in literary (but in fact largely political) groups or societies as the left-wing camp and the liberal camp, and thus based these two camps' interpretations of the concept of tragedy on an anticipated bifurcation between literary utilitarianism and literary aestheticism.⁴³¹ According to this classification, scholars such as Ouyang Yuqian, Hong Shen, Ma Yanxiang, Xiong Foxi, and Zhang Min were the leftists and ought to possess a clear political intention in their literary propositions, while Liang Shiqiu, Zong Baihua, and Li Anzhai were the liberalists and should therefore keep a relatively neutral standpoint from the politicisation of literature. However, the above examination shows that the viewpoints between these two camps were not so sharply contrasted: for example, the discussions of the function of tragedy included both aspects of the aesthetic features of tragedy and the pragmatic role tragedy played in society; also, both the so-called "leftist school" (Ouyang Yuqian and Ma Yanxiang) and "liberal school" (Zong Baihua and Li Anzhai) shared the opinion to see the tragic conflict as a confrontation between man and the external environment. In this case, the theoretical discussion of tragedy did not parallel the conventional divergences among different literary trends in the 1930s; or to quote Denton and Hockx, certain "shared literary values cut across the membership lines of literary groups"⁴³² in the theoretical

⁴³¹ See, for example, Xie Boliang, *Zhongguo beiju meixue shi* (History of the aesthetics of Chinese tragedy) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2014), 204-218; Zhu, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shi 1917-2000* (History of modern Chinese literature 1917-2000), 120-141; Qian, Wen, and Wu, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshi nian* (Three decades in modern Chinese literature), 191-214; and Fan, and Zhu, *1898-1949 Zhongwai wenxue bijiao shi* (History of Chinese and foreign comparative literature, 1898-1949), 561-620.

⁴³² Kirk A. Denton, and Michel Hockx, eds., *Literary Societies of Republican China* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008), 8.

construction of the concept of tragedy.

On the whole, the theoretical discussion of tragedy in the 1930s was still relatively immature and lacking variety, because most of the interpretations were to a certain extent the simple rephrasing or repetition of foreign theories or ideas. The explanation of Aristotle's definition, the analysis of tragedy's emotional effects, and the three-type classification of tragedy, can all serve as cases in point because there were many similarities and overlaps in different scholarly research. Moreover, except for Zhu Guangqian, who referred to a more diverse group of European theorists such as Hegel, Nietzsche and Croce in his studies,⁴³³ nearly all of the other scholars referred to Aristotle as their main theoretical foundation. This somewhat narrow horizon largely biased the Chinese reception of foreign theories, hence restricting the establishment and development of a theoretical system of the concept of tragedy in Republican China. In addition, the introduced terms and concepts had not been applied well to the analysis of Chinese literary works. Among those above mentioned scholars, only Ma Yanxiang, Xiong Foxi, and Qian Zhongshu underpinned their interpretations of the concept of tragedy with examples from traditional Chinese literature. As a result, whether and how these theoretical discussions had actually influenced the indigenous literary creativity in the 1930s are still left for further examination.

3.2 LITERARY CREATIVITY: THE OVERWHELMING REALISM

The modern Chinese literary practice of *the tragic* continued to develop in the 1930s: on the one hand, it retained the deep concern over current social issues and tragic experiences encountered by the Chinese from different social classes, offering the literary realist standpoint a continued existence in the construction of tragic

⁴³³ However, the Chinese translation of his book *Beiju xinli xue* (The Psychology of Tragedy) had not come out until the 1980s, so it is still arguable whether his research had left any impact on the formation of a literary discourse of tragedy in the 1930s. See Zhu Guangqian, "Zuozhe shuoming" (Author's notes), *Zhu Guangqian meixue wenji, di yi juan* (Collection of essays in aesthetics of Zhu Guangqian, vol. 1) (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1982), 16.

narratives; on the other hand, modern Chinese theatre reached its maturity⁴³⁴ at this time with the publication of Cao Yu's tragedies, which, inspired by Euro-American tragic traditions, were a "popular success"⁴³⁵ both at this time and in the following decades. In regard to the contemporary reviews of these works, the opposition between the political and aesthetic readings of *the tragic* was distinct. Unlike in the previous period when these two interpretations concentrated on rather different groups of authors, the debates over one particular author or work became common in scholarly research during this period. In the meantime, the perspective of realism prevailed in the mainstream of literary criticism due to the rising of the leftist literary movement, which largely determined the reception of certain works among contemporary audience of the 1930s.

3.2.1 The Realist Construction of Tragic Narratives

The 1930s literary expression of *the tragic* first of all inherited from those social problem plays and fiction of the 1920s an intense focus on social realities; yet, the faithfulness of literature, or the intentional pursuit of "counter-*Datanyuan*", was no longer the primary concern of the tragic narratives at this time. Instead, the conflict between personal will (*geren yizhi*) and external restraint (*waibu zhiyue*) became a popular theme, which paralleled the study of tragic conflicts in contemporary theoretical discussions. As a result, the tragic heroes in works of this kind were usually faced with a predestined fate of being defeated by the overpowering environment, making their tragedies inevitable and indicative of the destruction of the individual under the overwhelming opposing forces. To demonstrate this point, the following section will concentrate on two novels written in the 1930s, namely, *Jia* (Family, 1931-1932), and *Ziye* (Midnight, 1933), in examining their respective constructions of the tragic narrative as well as the contemporary interpretations of

⁴³⁴ Jonathan Nobel, "Cao Yu and Thunderstorm," in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, ed. Joshua S. Mostow (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 446.

⁴³⁵ Goldman, and Lee, *An Intellectual History of Modern China*, 239.

their tragic implications.

1) *Jia* (Family)

The first example is Ba Jin's⁴³⁶ *Jia* (Family).⁴³⁷ This novel depicts “a typical bourgeois family in collapse”⁴³⁸ by focusing upon the “inner struggles and tragedies”⁴³⁹ in a wealthy landowner clan, which is experiencing a strong impact from the drastic changes in society. The Gao family presented in the story consists of three generations: the Venerable Master Gao (*Gao laotaiye*) is the authority and the supreme ruler of the family, whose demand on the family members – especially the youngest generation – for their unconditional obedience to the feudal ethics produces a series of tragedies in the family; the Ke generation (*Ke zi bei*), somewhat aware of their doomed fate of decline, still lives an extravagant life of greediness and hypocrisy; the young generation consists of the three brothers Juexin, Juemin, Juehui, and their cousins, whose different temperaments and mentalities lead them onto different paths of life: Being the eldest male in his generation, Juexin is a typical feudal obedient son who complies totally with his filial duties; he is forced to give up his true love and has submitted to the arranged marriage under family pressure, and then abandons his wife when she is in labour because of his inability to resist the family's superstitious tradition. His two younger brothers, on the other hand, are more rebellious and resolute – Juemin rejects the marriage arranged for him and bravely pursues the girl he loves; Juexin, being the most progressive and

⁴³⁶ Ba Jin (1904-2005), penname of Li Yaotang. Novelist and translator; one of the most significant and widely read writers in the history of modern Chinese literature. Major works include *The Love Trilogy*: *Wu* (Fog, 1931), *Yu* (Rain, 1933), *Dian* (Lightning, 1935); *The Torrents Trilogy*: *Jia* (Family, 1933), *Chun* (Spring, 1938), *Qiu* (Autumn, 1940); and *Hanye* (Cold Nights, 1947).

⁴³⁷ A novel presenting the decline of a big feudal family, and the painful but persistent struggles of the younger generations for freedom and independence. First published by Shanghai: Kaiming shudian, 1933, reprinted in *Ba Jin quanji, di yi juan* (Complete works of Ba Jin, vol. 1) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1986), 3-430.

⁴³⁸ Ba Jin, “Chuban houji” (Postscript to the first edition), in *Ba Jin quanji, di yi juan* (Complete works of Ba Jin, vol. 1) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1986), 435.

⁴³⁹ Ba Jin, “Guanyu *Jia* – gei wode yige biaoge” (On Family – To one cousin of mine), reprinted in *Ba Jin quanji, di yi juan* (Complete works of Ba Jin, vol. 1) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1986), 443.

revolutionary, fights ceaselessly against the familial oppression and finally breaks with his family, declaring at the same time the breakdown of the feudalist Gao family.

One of the most frequently referenced reviews with regard to the literary realist features of this novel comes from the author himself, as Ba Jin once claimed that “*Jia* is a realist novel”⁴⁴⁰ in which “similar families can be found all over the country”.⁴⁴¹ The Gao family in *Jia* is portrayed as being filled with a sense of decadence and a series of potential conflicts; the most decisive factor in disintegrating this familial hierarchy is the inhumanity of an irrational family system in which “the lovable youths suffer, [...] struggle[,] and finally [have] not escape[d] destruction”.⁴⁴² To Ba Jin, it was “the system [*zhidu*] rather than the individual [*geren*]”⁴⁴³ that should be blamed for the tragedies in the Gao family; he expressed strong indignation upon seeing how the promising youth were destroyed by the feudal family morality, together with the belief in the transformation of the social order: “The old family is gradually sinking into its fate of destruction. Day by day I see it collapsing. It is destined by economic relationships and the social environment. This is my faith; it encourages me to declare death to an irrational system.”⁴⁴⁴ Therefore, to the author, the intergenerational conflict in *Jia* was in fact a typical reflection of the Chinese social landscape after the May Fourth Movement, when the new thoughts were in sharp opposition with traditional values and morality.

The reviews in the Republican period generally agreed with this interpretation. Critics compared *Jia* to *Honglou meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber) in their similar subject matters and characterisations, and referred to *Jia* as “an exposure of the

⁴⁴⁰ Ba, “Guanyu *Jia*” (On Family), 455-456.

⁴⁴¹ Ba, “Chuban houji” (Postscript to the first edition), 435.

⁴⁴² Ba, “Guanyu *Jia*” (On Family), 443. English translation taken from *Pa Chin and His Writings: Chinese Youth between the Two Revolutions*, Olga Lang (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 71.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 442.

ugliness of the ruling society”.⁴⁴⁵ They held that the theme of love and marriage in *Jia* “served to present the conflict between the new and the old forces, as well as between two ideologies”;⁴⁴⁶ therefore, “the confrontation within the family is in fact the confrontation within the society”.⁴⁴⁷

Wang Yian⁴⁴⁸ regarded the characterisation of the three Gao brothers as a representation of three types of the Chinese young generation who were facing oppression from feudal society: the first type was the radical (represented by Juehui) who, educated by the new ideas from the West, was no longer willing to live in the old environment and thus sought eagerly to break with his family; the second type was the moderate (represented by Juemin), who reluctantly found a balance between the new ideas he received and the old moral ethics he had to live up to; the third type was the conformist (represented by Juexin), who simply complied with the feudal code of family values without even attempting to resist.⁴⁴⁹

Among them, the eldest brother Juexin is the central tragic figure. He is educated by the new thinking and aware of his dilemma of struggling between the ideal and the reality; but at the same time he is also reluctant to make any change. His soberness mixes with his indecisiveness, and produces constant agonies in his life. Ba Jin acknowledged the autobiographical quality of *Jia*, pointing out his eldest

⁴⁴⁵ Wen Guoxin, “*Jia*” (Family), first published in *Beiping chenbao fukan, xueyuan* (Beijing: Literary supplement to the Morning Post, Lyceum), November 7, 1933, reprinted in *Ba Jin yanjiu ziliao, xia* (Research materials on Ba Jin, Part 3), ed. Li Cunguang (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 1268.

⁴⁴⁶ Ba Ren, “Lüelun Ba Jin de *Jia* sanbuqu” (A brief discussion of Family the trilogy), first published in *Zhai men ji* (Narrow gate) (Hang Kong: Haiyan shudian, 1941), reprinted in *Ba Jin yanjiu ziliao, xia* (Research materials on Ba Jin, Part 3), ed. Li Cunguang (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 1275.

⁴⁴⁷ Xu Zhongyu, “Ping Ba Jin de *Jia Chun Qiu*” (Review of Ba Jin’s Family, Spring, Autumn), first published in *Yiwen jikan* 1 (Collection of essays on literature and arts, vol. 1) (Jiangxi: Zhonghua zhengqi chubanshe, 1942), reprinted in *Ba Jin yanjiu ziliao, xia* (Research materials on Ba Jin, Part 3), ed. Li Cunguang (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 1289.

⁴⁴⁸ Wang Yian (1911-1992), penname of Zhou Lengjia, writer and scholar of classical Chinese literature.

⁴⁴⁹ Wang Yian, “Ba Jin de *Jia, Chun, Qiu*, ji qita” (Ba Jin’s Family, Spring, Autumn and others), first published in *Zazhi* (Magazine) 9, no. 6 (1942), reprinted in *Ba Jin yanjiu ziliao, xia* (Research materials on Ba Jin, Part 3), ed. Li Cunguang (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 1308-1309.

brother as the model for the protagonist Juexin.⁴⁵⁰ He expressed deep sympathy for this type of Chinese young person: “You [Ba Jin’s eldest brother] are neither the first nor the last who have received such unfair treatment; there are so many victims suffering from this fate – those lovable, promising, young lives. [...] I cherish them and should fight against this unjust fate for them!”⁴⁵¹ In this respect, later scholarship is quite clear and definite in acknowledging the author’s effort to express his accusation of the feudal family system through the character Juexin, making “the greatest tragedy”⁴⁵² in this novel a social tragedy. To them, Juexin’s tragic experience is largely the result of his personal weakness; however, “the root of evil [lies] not in personalities but in the family system”⁴⁵³ which is exactly what produced his character,⁴⁵⁴ making the “enlightened and aware members of the younger generation [...] forced to become unwilling accomplices in their own destruction”.⁴⁵⁵

But some contemporary critics of Ba Jin had different opinions; they held that the writer should not show any sympathy towards Juexin, but instead need to sharply criticise his attitude of irresistance. Wen Guoxin⁴⁵⁶ referred to Juexin as holding a “bowing-out-ism” (*zuoyi zhuyi*),⁴⁵⁷ which was “the behaviour of the coward” and

⁴⁵⁰ Ba, “Guanyu Jia” (On Family), 443-444.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 441.

⁴⁵² Michael Egan, “Jia” (Family), in *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature 1900-1949, vol. 1, The Novel*, ed. Milena Doleželová-Velingerová (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), 61.

⁴⁵³ Olga Lang, *Pa Chin and His Writings: Chinese Youth between the Two Revolutions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 76.

⁴⁵⁴ See, for instance, Qian, Wen, and Wu, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshi nian* (Three decades in modern Chinese literature), 263-264; and Zhu, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shi 1917-2000, shang* (History of modern Chinese literature 1917-2000, Part 1), 189.

⁴⁵⁵ Egan, *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature 1900-1949*, 62.

⁴⁵⁶ Wen Guoxin (1900-1992), writer; contributed actively to Republican journals as *Chenbao fukan* (Literary supplement to the Morning post), *Yusi* (Tattler), and *Wenxue jikan* (Literary quarterly) in his early writing career.

⁴⁵⁷ An ironical term created by the New Culture leftist writer Liu Bannong, means to politely avoid all disputes with others in order to focus on one’s own matters. English translation taken from Chen Pingyuan, *Touches of History: An Entry Into ‘May Fourth’ China*, trans. Michel Hockx, et al. (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2011), 129. Wen referenced this term here to indicate Juexin’s irresistance to the familial oppression.

thus deserved not sympathy but “detestation”.⁴⁵⁸ Xu Zhongyu,⁴⁵⁹ on the other hand, considered the portrayal of the three Gao brothers as somewhat flawed, in that the author “did not clearly reveal the fundamental reason that determined the differences in their characters”.⁴⁶⁰ This means Xu might not recognise Ba Jin’s attempt to blame the feudal family system for creating the tragedies in the Gao family, or perhaps he simply thought that blame was not explicit and penetrating enough. In fact, according to Ba Ren⁴⁶¹ and Xu Zhongyu, Ba Jin did not fully meet his expectations of “depicting thoroughly how a big feudal family has inevitably stepped on the road towards its self-made tomb”,⁴⁶² largely because he involved too much personal emotion with his tragic narrative. To them, Ba Jin showed his “weakness”⁴⁶³ in being “too susceptible”⁴⁶⁴ with his work; this emotional involvement reduced the literary realist significance and profundity of *Jia*, because it “left the audience only with passion and enthusiasm, rather than with enough insight or discernment” into the core of the problem.⁴⁶⁵ These different voices showed a variety of critical opinions; whilst the prioritisation on literature’s “faithful representation”⁴⁶⁶ of social reality to the “over-indulgence”⁴⁶⁷ of the author’s personal emotions served as a case in point to illustrate realism’s rejection of a romantic approach in literary reviews of *Jia* in the 1930s.

2) Ziye (Midnight)

⁴⁵⁸ Wen, “*Jia*” (Family), 1268-1270.

⁴⁵⁹ Xu Zhongyu (1915-), writer, literary theorist, educator of modern Chinese language and literature.

⁴⁶⁰ Xu, “Ping Ba Jin de *Jia Chun Qiu*” (Review of Ba Jin’s Family, Spring, Autumn), 1294.

⁴⁶¹ Ba Ren (1901-1972), penname of Wang Renshu. Writer, member of The Literary Association (*Wenxue yanjiu hui*), and League of Left-Wing Writers (*Zuoyi zuojia lianmeng*).

⁴⁶² Ba, “Guanyu *Jia*” (On Family), 443.

⁴⁶³ Ba, “Lüelun Ba Jin de *Jia* sanbuqu” (A brief discussion of Family the trilogy), 1273.

⁴⁶⁴ Xu, “Ping Ba Jin de *Jia Chun Qiu*” (Review of Ba Jin’s Family, Spring, Autumn), 1299.

⁴⁶⁵ Ba, “Lüelun Ba Jin de *Jia* sanbuqu” (A brief discussion of Family the trilogy), 1273.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ Xu, “Ping Ba Jin de *Jia Chun Qiu*” (Review of Ba Jin’s Family, Spring, Autumn), 1299.

Another example comes from Mao Dun's *Ziye* (Midnight).⁴⁶⁸ The theme of the individual versus the environment is at the heart of this novel, in that it presents the personal struggle for the development of Chinese national industry against the invasion of foreign capitalism. The story takes place in 1930, when the city of Shanghai is facing a series of hidden political-economic crises due to China's gradually increasing involvement with the global trend of imperialism. In the novel, Wu Sunfu is a nationalist running textile factories. He joins an alliance with some compradors and speculative entrepreneurs to enlarge the scale of his industry in order to compete with foreign capital; but his plan is constantly obstructed by some external forces beyond his control: the labour strike costs him great economic losses, the endless warfare disturbs his business and puts him in financial difficulties, while the suppression from his opponent obtained by foreign funds and the betrayal of his partner at the stock exchange finally bankrupts him. As a result, despite great ambition and determination, Wu Sunfu is eventually defeated in his striving for a national industrial empire, which he planned to be independent of foreign capitalism.

According to the author himself, the main concern of the book was to provide an "extensive description of the overall Chinese social landscape"⁴⁶⁹ in the 1930s, through which he intended to reflect three interrelated prevailing social issues: first, the national industrial capitalists intensified its exploitation of the working class due to the increasing foreign economic imperialism; second, the working class conducted economic and political struggles against exploitation; third, the civil war, the economic bankruptcy in the countryside, and the peasant unrest heavily afflicted the

⁴⁶⁸ A novel telling the story of a national industrialist's efforts and failure to enlarge his business against the increasing invasion of foreign capitalism and imperialism. First published by Shanghai: Kaiming shudian, 1933, reprinted in *Mao Dun quanji, di san juan, xiaoshuo san ji* (Complete works of Mao Dun, vol. 3, collection of three novels) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1984), 1-552.

⁴⁶⁹ Mao Dun, "Ziye houji" (Postscript to Midnight), in *Mao Dun quanji, di san juan, xiaoshuo san ji* (Complete works of Mao Dun, vol.3, collection of three novels) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1984), 553.

national industry.⁴⁷⁰ Contemporary critics in the main acknowledged this writing purpose. Qu Qiubai⁴⁷¹ considered *Ziye* “a reflection of the times”,⁴⁷² and further summarised the three aspects of conflict in this novel as being between imperialism and colonial China, between industrial capital and bank capital, as well as between the proletariat and the capitalist.⁴⁷³ Zhao Jiabi⁴⁷⁴ held that *Ziye* was “not only an autobiography of Wu Sunfu, but also the miserable history of the decline of Chinese national capitalism and the disillusionment of the petty bourgeoisie”.⁴⁷⁵ To Wu Zuxiang,⁴⁷⁶ Mao Dun’s contribution to modern Chinese literature after the New Culture Movement was his capability to reflect the current times and society with considerable insight; in this respect, *Ziye* “exposes the decline of the Chinese national bourgeoisie” and “pronounces the rising of the underclass”.⁴⁷⁷

In general, critics found Wu Sunfu’s “aspiration and failure to revitalise the national industry”⁴⁷⁸ an epitome of Chinese national entrepreneurs, who experienced

⁴⁷⁰ Mao Dun, “*Ziye shi zenyang xiecheng de*” (How I wrote *Midnight*), first published in *Xinjiang ribao fukan, lüzhou* (Supplement to Xinjiang daily, The oasis), June 1, 1939, reprinted in *Mao Dun yanjiu ziliao, shang* (Research materials on Mao Dun, Part 1), eds. Sun Zhongtian, and Zha Guohua (Beijing: Zhishi chancuan chubanshe, 2010), 425.

⁴⁷¹ Qu Qiubai (1899-1935), social activist, essayist, literary critic; one of the early leaders of the Communist Party, advocate of Marxism theories.

⁴⁷² Qu Qiubai (under the penname Shi Dier), “*Du Ziye*” (Reading *Midnight*), first published in *Zhonghua ribao, xiao gongxian* (China daily, Small contribution), August 13-14, 1933, reprinted in *Mao Dun yanjiu lunji* (Essay collection of the research on Mao Dun), ed. Zhuang Zhongqing (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1984), 179.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ Zhao Jiabi (1908-1997), editor and publisher, writer, translator, organised the compilation of *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi* (Compendium of modern Chinese literature) in 1936.

⁴⁷⁵ Zhao Jiabi, “*Ziye*” (*Midnight*), first published in *Xiandai* (Modern) 3, no. 6 (1933), reprinted in *Mao Dun yanjiu lunji* (Essay collection of the research on Mao Dun), ed. Zhuang Zhongqing (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1984), 185.

⁴⁷⁶ Wu Zuxiang (1908-1994), novelist, essayist, scholar of classical Chinese literature; famous for his distinctive literary realist features depicting the economic bankruptcy of the rural China.

⁴⁷⁷ Wu Zuxiang, “*Ziye*” (*Midnight*), first published in *Wenyi yuebao, chuankang hao* (Literature and art monthly, the debut issue), June 1, 1933, reprinted in *Mao Dun yanjiu lunji* (Essay collection of the research on Mao Dun), ed. Zhuang Zhongqing (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1984), 175-176.

⁴⁷⁸ Men Yan, “*Cong Ziye shuoqi*” (Starting from *Midnight*), first published in *Qinghua zhoukan, wenyi zhuanhao* (Qinghua weekly, special edition of literature and art) 39, nos. 5/6 (1933), reprinted in *Mao Dun yanjiu lunji*

serious setbacks in the struggle for development. To them, Wu's vain resistance against the overpowering irreversible trend was a social tragedy indicating the failure of Chinese national industrialisation;⁴⁷⁹ therefore, they placed the theme of this novel within a framework of literary realism.⁴⁸⁰

Those above mentioned critics positively assessed *Ziye*'s characterisation, in that it "creates not a fantasy of personal legend but concentrates on the social background manipulating human relations and economic structure".⁴⁸¹ However, Han Shiheng⁴⁸² thought otherwise. He sharply criticised Mao Dun's portrayal of Wu Sunfu, holding that *Ziye* was "a great book just in terms of its intentions". To Han, this novel "fails to find an artistic approach to achieve its grand goal" due to the "over idealisation" of the protagonist, which made it "a personal tragedy of a defeated hero"⁴⁸³ rather than having revealed some more profound social implications. This viewpoint did not consider *Ziye* as a social tragedy. It also pointed to the opposition between the realist and the romantic perspectives in reading this novel, as Han Shiheng, in line with

(Essay collection of the research on Mao Dun), ed. Zhuang Zhongqing (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1984), 170.

⁴⁷⁹ Shu Ming, "Ziye" (Midnight), first published in *Wenxue jikan, chuankang hao* (Literature quarterly, the debut issue), January 1, 1934, reprinted in *Mao Dun yanjiu lunji* (Essay collection of the research on Mao Dun), ed. Zhuang Zhongqing (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1984), 206.

⁴⁸⁰ See, Yu Dingyi, "Ping Ziye" (On Midnight), first published in *Gebi* (Gobi) 1, no.3 (1933), reprinted in *Mao Dun yanjiu lunji* (Essay collection of the research on Mao Dun), ed. Zhuang Zhongqing (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1984), 149-150; Qu Qiubai (under the penname Le Wen), "Ziye he guohuo nian" (Midnight and the year of national products), first published in *Shenbao, ziyu tan* (Shanghai news, free talk), April 2, 1933, reprinted in *Mao Dun yanjiu lunji* (Essay collection of the research on Mao Dun), ed. Zhuang Zhongqing (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1984), 156; Feng Xuefeng (under the penname He Rendang), "Ziye yu geming de xianshi zhuyi de wenxue" (Midnight and the revolutionary realist literature), first published in *Muxie wencong* (Essay collection of sawdust) 1 (1935), reprinted in *Mao Dun yanjiu lunji* (Essay collection of the research on Mao Dun), ed. Zhuang Zhongqing (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1984), 216-217.

⁴⁸¹ Yu, "Ping Ziye" (On Midnight), 150.

⁴⁸² Han Shiheng (1908-1987), writer, translator; member of League of Left-Wing Writers (*Zuoyi zuojia lianmeng*); productive in critical essays of literary review in the 1930s.

⁴⁸³ Han Shiheng, "Ziye de yishu sixiang ji renwu" (The artistic thought and characters of Midnight), first published in *Xiandai* (Modern) 4, no. 1 (1933), reprinted in *Mao Dun yanjiu ziliao, shang* (Research materials on Mao Dun, Part 1), eds. Sun Zhongtian, and Zha Guohua (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 581.

Men Yan who referred to this over-idealisation as a “romantic deification”⁴⁸⁴ of the protagonist, considered *Ziye* not as a realist novel but as “carrying an extremely strong colour of romanticism”,⁴⁸⁵ which went against and prevented the realisation of the author’s attempt to present Chinese social phenomena of his time. Han compared Wu Sunfu’s defeat to the death of the hero in Greek mythology in terms of its appeal to the regret and sympathy among the reader.⁴⁸⁶ He considered this emotional response exactly the cause for the lack of realisation of *Ziye*’s grand goal, because “the reader cannot [...] but care all the time for the prospects of his [Wu’s] business, thus ignoring the importance of other scenes and characters implied by the author.”⁴⁸⁷

Han Shiheng’s emphasis on readers’ compassion was a counterargument to the literary realist interpretation; because according to the claim for *Ziye* as “proletarian” and “revolutionary”,⁴⁸⁸ the character of the capitalist Wu Sunfu, who heavily exploited his workers and ruthlessly suppressed the strike, would conventionally be depicted as an antagonist who did not deserve any compassion in his final destruction. In this regard, Qu Qiubai contrasted the images of Wu Sunfu and his opponents in the novel, and concluded that “the readers are all sympathetic to Wu while resentful to those imperialists, warlords, communists, and strikers who destroy Wu’s business”.⁴⁸⁹ Zhu Guangqian considered this effect “unforeseen by the author”, but thought it reasonable, because Wu Sunfu was “portrayed with too much heroism” and thus received “sympathy and favour from some of the readers”.⁴⁹⁰ Despite their

⁴⁸⁴ Men, “Cong *Ziye* shuoqi” (Starting from Midnight), 168.

⁴⁸⁵ Han, “*Ziye* de yishu sixiang ji renwu” (The artistic thought and characters of Midnight), 582, 591.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 583.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 581, 583-584.

⁴⁸⁸ He [Feng], “*Ziye* yu geming de xianshi zhuyi de wenxue” (Midnight and the revolutionary realistic literature), 218.

⁴⁸⁹ Shi [Qu], “Du *Ziye*” (Reading Midnight), 179.

⁴⁹⁰ Zhu Ziqing (Zhu Peixian), “*Ziye*” (*Midnight*), first published in *Wenxue jikan* (Literature quarterly) 1, no. 2 (1934), reprinted in *Mao Dun yanjiu lunji* (Essay collection of the research on Mao Dun), ed. Zhuang Zhongqing (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1984), 212.

awareness of the unusual emotional appeal, the contemporary critics did not further explore this matter, nor did the author himself explain what his original intentions were. But to counterpose the romantic features of the characterisation to the realist thematic concern of the novel was in any case typical in the reading of *Ziye* in the 1930s; because later research has a more tolerant attitude towards the coexistence of these two features, in that scholars highlight the element of individual heroism in the portrayal of Wu Sunfu, and value at the same time the social realist significance of *Ziye*.⁴⁹¹

Generally speaking, the tragic theme of man versus the environment has different presentations in the above mentioned two novels: while the external circumstances are both overwhelming and destructive, the two groups of characters represent two kinds of reactions: Juexin follows his principle of non-resistance and gives in to the despotic power of the feudal family system; Wu Sunfu ceaselessly acts against the disturbance and manipulation of foreign imperialism before the last straw breaks him down. Yet none of them manage to escape the fate of destruction. This plot setting is in tune with the opinions of Hong Shen and Ma Yanxiang in regarding *the tragic* as the destined failure of man despite his resistance; or to quote David Der-wei Wang, that readers find in works of this kind “a display of the overwhelming environments against which men fight their ever-losing war”.⁴⁹² In addition, both novels are concerned with the presentation of ordinary people’s life experience. This perspective is at odds with the advocacy in the theoretical field of certain “greatness” of either social status or character of the tragic hero, but more closely relates to Lu

⁴⁹¹ See, for instance, Jin Shengxiong, “Lüelun *Ziye*” (A brief discussion of *Midnight*), first published in *Xin jianshe* (New construction) 4 (1957), reprinted in *Mao Dun yanjiu ziliao, shang* (Research materials on Mao Dun, Part 1), eds. Sun Zhongtian, and Zha Guohua (Beijing: Zhishi chancuan chubanshe, 2010), 610-616; Wang Xiaoming, *Qianliu yu xuanwo: lun ershi shiji Zhongguo xiaoshuojia de chuanguo xinli zhang’ai* (The undercurrent and the whirlpool: On the psychological barriers in the literary creation of 20th-century Chinese novelists) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1991), 90-93; Qian, Wen, and Wu, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshi nian* (Three decades in modern Chinese literature), 229-230.

⁴⁹² David Der-wei Wang, *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 144.

Xun's idea of the commonplace tragedy, in which *the tragic* is no longer associated with something sacred or heroic but with the ordinary miseries of the ordinary men. Also, the literary realist perspective is remarkable in both the writers' intentions and the contemporary reviews, while the romantic features of these novels are usually rejected or used as defects to emphasise the realist implications.

3.2.2 The Debate between Aesthetics and Politics

Cao Yu⁴⁹³ is generally regarded as one of the most successful modern Chinese playwrights. Interpretations of his tragedies vary across time and literary trends, in which aesthetic and political perspectives alternate and compete with each other. This section focuses on examining the critical debates over Cao Yu's most famous tragedy, *Leiyu* (Thunderstorm, 1934), for a concrete demonstration of how the playwright's efforts to "transplant the European stage"⁴⁹⁴ of *the tragic* to China was interpreted and accepted by his audience in the 1930s. The contention between the aesthetic purposes and the political effects in assessing this play signified to a large extent a contemporary critical trend of a conflation of the debates on aestheticism and realism, and thus served as an example of the actual impact of this conflation on the interpretation of *the tragic* in the 1930s Chinese literary field.

Having a high status in modern Chinese literature, *Leiyu*⁴⁹⁵ is referred to as "the most famous dramatic work of the pre-war period and possibly the most performed play in the modern Chinese theatre".⁴⁹⁶ It was finished in 1933 and first published in 1934, followed shortly by several stage performances in both China and Japan with

⁴⁹³ Cao Yu (1910-1996), penname of Wan Jiabao. One of the most important playwrights in modern Chinese literature; the forerunner of Chinese spoken drama (*huaju*). Major plays include *Leiyu* (Thunderstorm, 1934), *Richu* (Sunrise, 1936), *Yuanye* (The Wilderness, 1937), and *Beijing ren* (Peking Man, 1940).

⁴⁹⁴ McDougall, and Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, 28.

⁴⁹⁵ A four-act play depicting the sudden exposure of the unrevealed secrets and sins in a big feudal family, and the destruction of the family members as the victims of uncontrolled passion for oppression, revenge, and incestuous love. First published in *Wenxue jikan* (Literary quarterly) 1, no.3 (1934), reprinted in *Cao Yu quanji, di yi quan* (Complete works of Cao Yu, vol. 1), eds. Tian Benxiang, and Liu Yijun (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 1996), 5-188.

⁴⁹⁶ McDougall, and Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, 177.

positive responses in the main.⁴⁹⁷ The dramatic structure develops around a series of chaotic events, presenting the disintegration of one patriarchal family triggered by incestuous passion, moral degradation, ferocious revenge, and predestined retribution. The capitalist and coalmine owner Zhou Puyuan has once driven away the servant maid Shiping whom he formerly seduced, so that he could marry a young girl from another wealthy family. Some thirty years later, the eldest son of the Zhou family, Zhou Ping, is holding secret sexual relationships with both his stepmother Fanyi and the servant girl Sifeng, not knowing that the latter, who is pregnant with his child, is, in fact, his half-sister. On the other hand, Zhou Puyuan is in fierce confrontation with a group of workers from his coalmine; and his unrevealed second son with Shiping, Lu Dahai, is the leader of the strike action. In order to dissuade the youngest son Zhou Chong from having affection for Sifeng, Fanyi calls the girl's mother, Shiping, to the Zhou house to take her daughter away; subsequently the complex relationships among these characters are gradually revealed and lead them to their respective tragic ends.

Some of Cao Yu's peer critics associated *Leiyu* with various foreign models. Li Jianwu⁴⁹⁸ pointed out two implicit European inspirations, Euripides's *Hippolytus* (428 BC) and Racine's *Phèdre* (1667), as borrowings for the incestuous story between stepmother and stepson, together with the psychological description of the female character, Fanyi, as a woman driven by a strong desire for revenge.⁴⁹⁹ Tian Han⁵⁰⁰ referred to *Leiyu* as "a mixture of several famous dramas" such as

⁴⁹⁷ For details see Zhang Yaojie, *Xiju dashi Cao Yu* (Cao Yu the master of drama) (Taiyuan: Shanxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003), 42-57; and McDougall, and Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, 177.

⁴⁹⁸ Li Jianwu (1906-1982), writer, dramatist, and literary critic; member of The Literary Association (*Wenxue yanjiu hui*), leader of the drama movement in Shanghai during the period of Anti-Japanese War; known for his distinctive literary features of romanticism in the expression of the characters' inner activities.

⁴⁹⁹ Li Jianwu (under the penname Liu Xiwei), "*Leiyu* – Cao Yu xiansheng zuo" (Thunderstorm written by Mr. Cao Yu), first published in *Dagong bao* (Dagong newspaper), August 31, 1935, reprinted in Liu Xiwei [Li Jianwu], *Juhua ji* (Ruminations) (Shanghai: Wenhua shenghuo chubanshe, 1936), 120-122.

⁵⁰⁰ Tian Han (1898-1968), playwright, poet, literary critic and activist, pioneering figures in modern Chinese theatre, one of the founders of The Creation Society (*Chuangzao she*) and League of Left-Wing Writers (*Zuoyi*

“Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* [429 BC], Ibsen’s *Ghosts* [1881], and Galsworthy’s *Strife* [1909]”.⁵⁰¹ Other critics like Ouyang Yuqian, Guo Moruo, and Zhou Yang⁵⁰² all regarded *Leiyu* as a tragedy of fate (*mingyun beiju*) that bore great similarity to the ancient Greek tragedies.⁵⁰³ Scholars of later generations have followed this opinion with the exploration of more connections between *Leiyu* and Euro-American plays, such as a similar characterisation of Fanyi as “a woman of passion” with that of Abbie Putnam in Eugene O’Neill’s *Desire under the Elms* (1924) and Mrs. Alving in Ibsen’s *Ghosts*,⁵⁰⁴ and of Zhou Chong as an innocent young idealist with that of Robert Mayo in Eugene O’Neill’s *Beyond the Horizon* (1920).⁵⁰⁵ In addition, scholars see a parallel in themes and techniques between *Leiyu* and some foreign plays, for example, the image of the “revenging woman” as in Euripides’s *Medea* (431 BC),⁵⁰⁶ the symbolic use of “the thunderstorm” as in Ostrovsky’s *The Storm* (1859),⁵⁰⁷ and the techniques of retrospection and the classical unities of the dramatic structure as in ancient Greek tragedies or in Ibsen’s plays.⁵⁰⁸ Generally speaking, scholars at different times all see quite a variety of possible “[a]ttributions

zuojia lianmeng); major works include *Kafei dian zhi yiye* (A night in a café, 1922), *Huohu zhiye* (The night the tiger was caught, 1924), and *Nanguai* (Return to the south, 1929).

⁵⁰¹ Tian Han, “Baofengyu zhong de Nanjing yitan yipie” (A glance at the art circle of Nanjing in the storm), first published in *Xinmin bao rikan* (Journal of Xinmin newspaper), June 9, 10, 12, 14, 29, 1936, reprinted in *Tian Han quanji, di shiwu juan, wenlun* (Complete works of Tian Han, vol. 15, literary criticism) (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 2000), 287.

⁵⁰² Zhou Yang (1908-1989), literary theorist and activist, translator; one of the leaders of League of Left-Wing Writers (*Zuoyi zuojia lianmeng*); advocate of Marxist theories and the literary realist approach from the Soviet Union.

⁵⁰³ See related selection of texts in *Cao Yu yanjiu ziliao* (Research materials on Cao Yu), eds. Tian Benxiang, and Hu Shuhe (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1991), 706, 760, 828.

⁵⁰⁴ S.M. Joseph Lau, *Ts’ao Yü, The Reluctant Disciple of Chekhov and O’Neill: A Study in Literary Influence* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1970), 8-10.

⁵⁰⁵ Ma, *Minzu beiju yishi yu geti yishu biaoqian* (The national tragic consciousness and the individual artistic presentation), 174-175.

⁵⁰⁶ He Ping, and Ren Changming, “Qianxi gu Xila beiju dui *Leiyu* de yingxiang” (A brief discussion of the influence from ancient Greek tragedy on Thunderstorm), *Xiju wenxue* (Dramatic literature) 8 (2013): 108.

⁵⁰⁷ Wang, “Chinese literature from 1841 to 1937,” 507.

⁵⁰⁸ Tian, *Zhongguo xiandai bijiao xiju shi* (History of modern Chinese comparative drama), 309.

of foreign ancestry”⁵⁰⁹ for *Leiyu*, and usually regard this resemblance as a result of Cao Yu’s extensive and thorough research interests in the study, translation, and performance of Euro-American literary works.

However, the playwright himself hesitated to acknowledge this connection. Shortly after the publication of *Leiyu*, Cao Yu clearly rejected the idea of relating this play to any particular foreign work or author: “To be honest, this [the idea that I am a follower of Ibsen and that certain parts of the play are inspired by Euripides’s *Hippolytus* or Racine’s *Phèdre*] has more or less surprised me. [...] I have tried my best but still do not reckon there is any intentional imitation of any author in this play.”⁵¹⁰ But on the other hand, Cao had admitted his indebtedness to ancient Greek plays before this declaration: “Someone claims that there is an influence from Ibsen in this play [*Leiyu*], but I would rather say there is an influence from ancient Greek plays.”⁵¹¹ He further explained this influence in a later article by referring to the use of the Prologue and Epilogue to “function more or less as a Greek chorus in leading the audience into a wider sea of emotions and thoughts”.⁵¹² These somewhat self-contradictory statements showed Cao’s ambiguous attitude toward the foreign influences he received, the motivation of which gave room to some speculation.

Joseph Lau suggests that it may be because Cao mistakenly confused “the question of influence with imitation” – the latter of which “he was ashamed [of]”.⁵¹³ According to Wang Lieyao, the well-internalised incorporation of foreign influences in Cao’s literary practices makes it “relatively hard to trace and orient any single

⁵⁰⁹ McDougall, and Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, 178.

⁵¹⁰ Cao Yu, “*Leiyu xu*” (The preface to *Thunderstorm*), first published in *Leiyu* (*Thunderstorm*) (Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua shenghuo chubanshe, 1936), reprinted in *Cao Yu quanji, di yi juan* (Complete Works of Cao Yu, vol. 1), eds. Tian Benxiang, and Liu Yijun (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 1996), 5.

⁵¹¹ Cao Yu, “*Leiyu de xiezuo*” (The writing of *Thunderstorm*), *Zawen* (Essay) 2 (1935): 35.

⁵¹² Cao, “*Leiyu xu*” (The preface to *Thunderstorm*), 14.

⁵¹³ Lau, *Ts’ao Yü, The Reluctant Disciple of Chekhov and O’Neil*, 8.

foreign writer in his artistry”;⁵¹⁴ hence to simply associate him with any individual writer is largely one-sided. Another option this study would like to suggest here is that Cao Yu wanted to stress his disagreement with certain contemporary interpretations in the reading of his play, as a further look at those comments *Leiyu* received in the 1930s shows that there were significant differences between the critics’ reviews and the playwright’s own intentions.

One of the prevailing opinions in the 1930s was to see *Leiyu* as a tragedy of fate, which resulted in a mixed review among critics at this time. Li Jianwu considered the concept of fate (*mingyun guannian*) “the most powerful, invisible yet penetrating force”⁵¹⁵ in *Leiyu*. He differentiated it from that of the ancient Greek tragedies, in that the concept of fate in this play was presented not as retribution from the heavens but as an impulse for revenge – first in Zhou Fanyi and then in Lu Dahai – which served as “the hidden impetus to the plot development”.⁵¹⁶ In view of this difference, Li held that the mainspring of *Leiyu* was not certain mysterious, unpredictable forces which operated outside human society, but “a complexity of personal relations and psychologies” that caused those characters their mental and physical destruction; Li thought this was a successful achievement for the playwright.⁵¹⁷

Other scholars, on the contrary, criticised this expression of the concept of fate and therefore questioned *Leiyu*’s value. According to Guo Moruo, what Cao attempted to write was “a Greek-style tragedy of fate”; this “old-fashioned perception of *the tragic*” no longer fitted into modern times when “people have already become masters of their own fortunes”. As a result, Guo found the entire play to be “shrouded by a dense atmosphere of old moral values and hence lacking in initiative”, and attributed this weakness to “the playwright’s lack of awareness” of

⁵¹⁴ Wang Lieyao, *Jidujiao wenhua yu Zhongguo xiandai xiju de beiju yishi* (Christian culture and the tragic consciousness of modern Chinese drama) (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 2002), 361. See also Tian, *Zhongguo xiandai bijiao xiju shi* (History of modern Chinese comparative drama), 360-363.

⁵¹⁵ Liu [Li], “*Leiyu* – Cao Yu xiansheng zuo” (Thunderstorm written by Mr. Cao Yu), 116-117.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the present situation.⁵¹⁸ Tian Han also criticised this play for simply basing the series of tragic events on “irresistible fate” (*bu kekang de mingyun*). He proposed to stage this play with a “critical” view, which meant to “revise this anachronistic tragedy of fate [*yunming beiju*] into a social tragedy [*shehui beiju*]” in order to “be responsible towards the audience”,⁵¹⁹ because “the young generation which has been toughened by the May Fourth Movement” would rather “fight bravely against those evil makers” than “submit to the cruelty of ‘fate’”.⁵²⁰

Such criticism became even stronger, when *Richu* (Sunrise, 1936)⁵²¹ came out with a relatively more explicit thematic concern over the darkness of the society, and was thus placed by critics in sharp contrast to *Leiyu*: Ouyang Yuqian regarded *Richu* as one step forward from *Leiyu*, because the latter “is embedded too much with the tragic sense of fate”;⁵²² Zhou Yang termed the concept of fate in *Leiyu* as “fatalism” (*suming lun*), which “greatly reduce[d] the ideological significance of this play” and therefore was “extremely harmful to the general audience whose simple minds would easily be affected by a notion of predestination and kinship enmity.”⁵²³ It is noticeable that the above criticism more or less labelled the concept of fate in *Leiyu* as a spiritual heir to the ancient Greek tragedies (even Li Jianwu, who thought highly

⁵¹⁸ Guo Moruo, “Guanyu Cao Yu de *Leiyu*” (On Cao Yu’s *Thunderstorm*), first published in *Dongliu* (Oriental current) 2, no. 4 (1936), reprinted in *Guo Moruo lun chuanguo* (Guo Moruo on literary creation), ed. Zhang Chenghuan (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1983), 760-761.

⁵¹⁹ Tian, “Baofengyu zhong de Nanjing yitan yipie” (A glance at the art circle of Nanjing in the storm), 288.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁵²¹ A four-act play written by Cao Yu in 1936, presenting the extravagance and decadence of metropolitan life. First published in *Wenxue jikan* (Literary quarterly) 1-4 (1936), reprinted in *Cao Yu quanji, di yi juan* (Complete Works of Cao Yu, vol. 1), eds. Tian Benxiang, and Liu Yijun (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 1996), 198-400.

⁵²² Ouyang Yuqian, “*Richu* de yanchu” (The staging of *Sunrise*), first published in *Richu shouci yanchu tekan* (Special issue for the debut of *Sunrise*), 1937, reprinted in *Cao Yu yanjiu ziliao, xia* (Research materials on Cao Yu, Part 2), eds. Tian Benxiang, and Hu Shuhe (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1991), 706.

⁵²³ Zhou Yang, “Lun *Leiyu* he *Richu* – bing dui Huang Zhigang xiansheng de piping de piping” (On *Thunderstorm* and *Sunrise* – And the criticism in response to that of Mr. Huang Zhigang), first published in *Guangming* (The light) 2, no. 8 (1937), reprinted in *Cao Yu yanjiu ziliao, xia* (Research materials on Cao Yu, Part 2), eds. Tian Benxiang, and Hu Shuhe (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1991), 827.

of this play, rejected the idea of providence or heavenly punishment), which they regarded as outdated and inappropriate to the social circumstances at the time. This may to some extent explain the playwright's reluctance to admit his foreign influences, as Cao Yu used to be "frightened" by those criticisms which brought him feelings of "inferiority" and "incompetence".⁵²⁴

As a matter of fact, Cao Yu's own understanding of *Leiyu*'s theme and philosophical implications was totally different. In his view, what *Leiyu* conveyed was neither "an idea of Karma" (*yinguo*) nor "heavenly retribution" (*baoying*), but a sense of "cosmic cruelty" (*tiandi jian de canren*) that was best represented by the sudden deaths of Sifeng and Zhou Chong who did nothing wrong to deserve such a treatment.⁵²⁵ Here, Cao admitted the existence of a certain dominator behind such "cruelty" and "cold-bloodedness", but did not equal it to the Hebrew perception of God, the Greek dramatic notion of fate, or the modern concept of the "law of nature" (*ziran de faze*).⁵²⁶ Rather, he depicted this "complex and yet primitive sentiment" as vaguely "an inexplicable mystery" (*moming qimiao de shenmi*)⁵²⁷ that was "too overwhelming and complicated to be either properly named or described of its true features"⁵²⁸: "this inexplicable mystery finally cost an innocent girl [Sifeng] her life, couldn't this primitive psychology sometimes excite the heart and soul of civilised mankind and lead him towards an awareness of the deeper and more fathomless mystery in nature?"⁵²⁹ In this respect, Zhu Guangqian's comments provided another explanation to this thematic concern, that it "generally gives us the impression that there is in the universe a power which is neither controllable by human will nor intelligible to human understanding, and that this power is blind to the distinction of

⁵²⁴ Cao, "*Leiyu xu*" (The preface to Thunderstorm), 6.

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁵²⁶ Ibid.

⁵²⁷ Cao, "*Leiyu de xiezuo*" (The writing of Thunderstorm), 35.

⁵²⁸ Cao, "*Leiyu xu*" (The preface to Thunderstorm), 7. English translation taken from S.M. Joseph Lau, *Ts'ao Yü, The Reluctant Disciple of Chekhov and O'Neill: A Study in Literary Influence* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1970), 13.

⁵²⁹ Cao, "*Leiyu de xiezuo*" (The writing of Thunderstorm), 35.

right and wrong and it crushes the virtuous as well as the wicked.”⁵³⁰

However, Cao Yu’s contemporary critics did not accept this viewpoint. Compared with the largely abstract philosophical ideas,⁵³¹ scholars in the 1930s were more interested in exploring some practical and realist elements in *Leiyu* that related to such heated social issues as personal freedom, class struggle, and social transformation. Shortly after *Leiyu*’s publication, there were comments on the pragmatic aspect of this play as a condemnation of the capitalist social system: “it is an exposure of a Chinese capitalist family with a penetrating analysis deep into their sins covered under the wealth”;⁵³² “the obscene and evil ugliness of the capitalist family is ruthlessly revealed through the presentation of their complicated love affairs, and the fierce thunderstorm in the summer’s night is indicative of the crumbling of this class”.⁵³³ Other reviews added to the play a significance of anti-feudalism in terms of its characterisation: first of Fanyi who, as a female victim of feudalism morality,⁵³⁴ revealed with her death the cold-bloodness and the crisis of feudalism system;⁵³⁵ then of Lu Dahai who, confronting Zhou Puyuan, signified the rise of the much oppressed working-class⁵³⁶ in contrast to the decay of the feudalism forces.⁵³⁷ According to these criticisms, *Leiyu* as a social tragedy needed to make the

⁵³⁰ Zhu, *Psychology of Tragedy*, 245.

⁵³¹ Zhang Geng once described his reading experience of *Leiyu* as “unempathetic” and “alienated” that made him unable to identify with the author’s world. See Zhang Geng, “Beiju de fazhan – ping *Leiyu*” (The development of tragedy – On Thunderstorm), first published in *Guangming* (The light), June, 1939, reprinted in *Cao Yu yanjiu ziliao, shang* (Research materials on Cao Yu, Part 1), eds. Tian Benxiang, and Hu Shuhe (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1991), 513.

⁵³² Bai Mei, “*Leiyu* pipan” (The criticism on Thunderstorm), *Dagong bao* (Dagong newspaper), August 20-23, 1934.

⁵³³ Bai Ning, “*Leiyu* zai Dongjing gongyan” (The performance of Thunderstorm in Tokyo), *Zawen* (Essay) 1 (1935): 39.

⁵³⁴ Zhang, “Beiju de fazhan” (The development of tragedy), 518.

⁵³⁵ Zhou, “Lun *Leiyu* he *Richu*” (On Thunderstorm and Sunrise), 826.

⁵³⁶ Liu [Li], “*Leiyu* – Cao Yu xiansheng zuo” (Thunderstorm written by Mr. Cao Yu), 118.

⁵³⁷ As a matter of fact, the characterisation of Lu Dahai was more often used as a negative example to show *Leiyu*’s weakness, because some reviews held that the portrayal of him only as a part of a complex kin relationship rather than a representative of social conflicts was “gloomy” and thus “a complete failure”. See the

best use of its subject matter in exploring “the confrontation between two social forces” rather than “the entanglement among kinship”, in order to “show the audience a historical prospect of the predestined collapse of an out-dated feudalism”.⁵³⁸

This perspective on the one hand was in line with the pragmatic view promoted by Ouyang Yuqian, Xiong Foxi, and Zhang Min about the function of tragedy as a means of social enlightenment and criticism, on the other hand also carried an influence from the emphasis on man’s initiative to resist against rather than submit to the external restrictions, which was advocated by Zong Baihua, Ouyang Yuqian and Ma Yanxiang. The impact of this viewpoint is long-term, as later research often place particular attention on the historical background of the play: scholars refer to *Leiyu* as “the tragedy of the old marriage system, the feudal family structure, the oppression of the lower classes, the corruption of urban capitalists, and the frustrations of young intellectuals”,⁵³⁹ which used to be “the most sensitive issues involved in the May Fourth Movement”.⁵⁴⁰ To them, this was one of the reasons for its popularity among the Chinese in the 1930s, when the audience “[were] themselves trapped in an ongoing historical thunderstorm” at that time.⁵⁴¹

This interpretation was, again, in sharp contrast to Cao Yu’s purpose of writing. Two years after the publication of *Leiyu*, Cao referred to those literary realist readings and criticisms as being “far beyond his own understanding of this play”,⁵⁴²

comments in Tian, “Baofengyu zhong de Nanjing yitan yipie” (A glance of the art circle of Nanjing in the storm), 287-288; and Zhou, “Lun *Leiyu* he *Richu*” (On Thunderstorm and Sunrise), 828.

⁵³⁸ Zhou, “Lun *Leiyu* he *Richu*” (On Thunderstorm and Sunrise), 828.

⁵³⁹ Lee, “Road to Revolution,” 465.

⁵⁴⁰ Lau, *Ts’ao Yü, The Reluctant Disciple of Chekhov and O’Neill*, 6.

⁵⁴¹ Wang, “Chinese literature from 1841 to 1937,” 507. See also Lau, *Ts’ao Yü, The Reluctant Disciple of Chekhov and O’Neill*, 6; and Nobel, “Cao Yu and *Thunderstorm*,” 447.

⁵⁴² Cao Yu, “*Leiyu* ri yiben xu” (Preface to the Japanese translation of *Thunderstorm*), in *Cao Yu quanji, di yi juan* (Complete Works of Cao Yu, vol. 1), eds. Tian Benxiang, and Liu Yijun (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 1996), 23.

because it was not his intention “to correct, criticize, or satirize anything”⁵⁴³: “What I wrote was a poem – a narrative poem that, [...] in spite of its involvement with something real and practical (such as the strike), was by no means a social problem play.”⁵⁴⁴ On the contrary, he insisted on the thematic concern over human beings’ vain struggle under the dominance of a mysterious external force: “I portrayed the universe [yuzhou] in *Leiyu* as a cruel well [*canku de jing*] in which a person – no matter how hard he cried out in pain – could simply find no way to escape once falling into this dark hole.”⁵⁴⁵ Here, Cao valued much the aesthetic distance between the audience and his play, in that he suggested to take *Leiyu* as “a myth” or “a story”⁵⁴⁶ in order to better appreciate the “poetic sentiment” (*shiyang de qinghuai*).⁵⁴⁷ To him, “the plot develops in a way too horrible to be emotionally accepted in its secret, unknowable implications”;⁵⁴⁸ therefore, the Prologue and Epilogue served as a “veil of emotional distance so as to mitigate the intensity of the emotional and rational shock”.⁵⁴⁹ Yet this proposal was nevertheless ignored: both the Prologue and Epilogue were deleted from the script ever since the first few stage performances both out of the consideration for the length of the play and their “irrelevance” to the theme.⁵⁵⁰ Zhou Yang also suggested not to deliberately create a so-called “emotional distance” between the audience and the play, because it would

⁵⁴³ Cao, “*Leiyu xu*” (The preface to Thunderstorm), 7. English translation taken from S.M. Joseph Lau, *Ts’ao Yü, The Reluctant Disciple of Chekhov and O’Neill: A Study in Literary Influence* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1970), 6.

⁵⁴⁴ Cao, “*Leiyu de xiezuo*” (The writing of Thunderstorm), 34.

⁵⁴⁵ Cao, “*Leiyu xu*” (The preface to Thunderstorm), 8.

⁵⁴⁶ Cao, “*Leiyu de xiezuo*” (The writing of Thunderstorm), 34.

⁵⁴⁷ Cao, “*Leiyu xu*” (The preface to Thunderstorm), 14.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., 7. English translation taken from S.M. Joseph Lau, *Ts’ao Yü, The Reluctant Disciple of Chekhov and O’Neill: A Study in Literary Influence* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1970), 6.

⁵⁵⁰ See Cao Yu, “*Richu ba*” (Postscript of Sunrise), first published in *Richu* (Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua shenghuo chubanshe, 1936), reprinted in *Cao Yu wenji, shang* (Collection of Cao Yu’s works, Part 1) (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2000), 384; and Wang Weiping, “Jieshou yu bianxing – Cao Yu juzuo de zhuguan zhuiqiu yu guanzhong de keguan jieshou” (Acceptance and variation – The subjective intention and objective reception of Cao Yu’s dramas), *Shehui kexue zhanxian* (Social sciences front) 1 (1994): 244-245.

rather be better to “just let the audience be frightened and shocked by the sinfulness revealed before them, and cry out without control for the coming of a thunderstorm that shakes everything!”⁵⁵¹

According to later scholars, this situation revealed a paradox regarding the acceptance of *Leiyu* in the Chinese literary field of the 1930s, since the audience were so engaged in reading and appreciating this play with both “an unprecedented enthusiasm” and “an overwhelming tendency of misinterpretation”.⁵⁵² To them, this problem emerged almost immediately after *Leiyu* was put on stage in 1935. The comments of the editors of *Zawen* (Essay) provided an example, as they noticed a big gap between the audience’s reaction and the playwright’s intention when the play was performed in Tokyo: “According to the actual effect of the performance, what the audience have sensed from the play is a good exposure of the reality and sarcasm of the declining class – this is far from the author’s motive as stated below.”⁵⁵³ Some scholars consider this difference in interpretation as a “discrepancy between the author’s subjective intention and his works’ objective effect”, and see it as rather “common”⁵⁵⁴ because “the separation between the author’s spiritual world and the audience’s horizon of expectation” leads to divergence in the focus of literary interpretation.⁵⁵⁵

Yet, this study would like to suggest that this “paradox” revealed exactly the opposing political and aesthetic perspectives in the reading of *the tragic* in the 1930s. Seen from the above demonstration, it is clear that Cao Yu’s original intention was concerned more with the aesthetic features of his play; but a literary realist viewpoint

⁵⁵¹ Zhou, “Lun *Leiyu* he *Richu*” (On Thunderstorm and Sunrise), 829.

⁵⁵² Qian, Wen, and Wu, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshi nian* (Three decades in modern Chinese literature), 421.

⁵⁵³ “Bianzhe anyu, *Leiyu* de xiezuo” (Editors’ words in “The writing of Thunderstorm”), *Zawen* (Essay) 2 (1935): 34.

⁵⁵⁴ Yue Daiyun, “*Leiyu* zhong de renwu xingge” (The Characterisation of Thunderstorm), in *Bijiao wenxue yu Zhongguo xiandai wenxue* (Comparative literature and modern Chinese literature) (Fuzhou: Fujian jiaoyu chubanshe, 2015), 215.

⁵⁵⁵ Wang, “Jieshou yu bianxing” (Acceptance and variation), 244.

concentrating on *Leiyu*'s practical relationship with prevailing social issues was remarkably influential and somewhat triumphed in the field of literary criticism, in a way that it not only determined to a great extent the popularity of this play, but also in return changed Cao's attitude. To Cao, the criticism on the "self-contradiction between his worldview and his artistic approach"⁵⁵⁶ was so pervasive that it made him gradually become less resolute in negating the implication of social criticism in *Leiyu* – "Quite possibly, when I came close to finishing the play, it might be that I was seized by a sudden passion so overwhelming that I could not but seek to release it in vilifying the Chinese family system and society"⁵⁵⁷ – just in order not to be side-lined in literary circles.⁵⁵⁸

Stated above, the viewpoint of literary realism prevailed in the acceptance of *Leiyu* in the 1930s. It differed obviously from the situation in theoretical discussions during the same period, when the pragmatic concern was less dominant in its relation to the aesthetic interpretation of the concept of tragedy. This has to be understood in the context of the reception of *the tragic* related to the Chinese literary and social circumstances in the 1930s, when, as summarised by later scholars, the emphasis on "the social function of literature and arts"⁵⁵⁹ required "a criticism and exposure" of

⁵⁵⁶ Zhang, "Beiju de fazhan" (The development of tragedy), 520.

⁵⁵⁷ Cao, "*Leiyu* xu" (The preface to Thunderstorm), 7. English translation taken from S.M. Joseph Lau, *Ts'ao Yü, The Reluctant Disciple of Chekhov and O'Neill: A Study in Literary Influence* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1970), 6.

⁵⁵⁸ Cao Yu completely converted to a standpoint of social criticism in the 1950s, and confessed his "backwardness" in *Leiyu* for the expression of a concept of fatalism. He revised the play, deleted the Prologue and Epilogue, and made Lu Dahai more distinctly a representative of the working class with strong political awareness. See detailed discussions in Liao Li, "Tan Cao Yu dui *Leiyu* de xiugai" (On Cao Yu's revision of Thunderstorm), *Zhengzhou daxue xuebao, zhexue shehui kexue ban* (Journal of Zhengzhou University, philosophy and social sciences) 1 (1963): 81-99; and Cao Yu's own accounts of his changing standpoint in Cao Yu, "Wo dui jinhou chuanguozuo de chubu renshi" (Preliminary thoughts on how to proceed with my writing in the future), first published in *Wenyi bao* (Newspaper on literature and art) 3, no. 1 (1950), reprinted in *Cao Yu quanji, di yi juan* (Complete Works of Cao Yu, vol. 1), eds. Tian Benxiang, and Liu Yijun (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 1996), 44-48.

⁵⁵⁹ Tong Weimin, "*Leiyu* yanjiu liushi nian" (Sixty-years of the research of Thunderstorm), *Wuhan jiaoyu xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of Wuhan institute of education) 16, no. 1 (1997): 2.

social problems in literary creativity.⁵⁶⁰ In such a case, the literariness and artistry of *Leiyu* was easily ignored and had to give way to a rather secular and pragmatic interpretation.

To summarise, it is clear that the majority of literary reviews in the 1930s are concerned with the literary realist aspect of those above mentioned works, and therefore read them with regard to their social implications and significance regardless of the writers' political inclinations. It also needs to be pointed out that, apart from Mao Dun who participated actively in social campaigns at his time, neither Ba Jin nor Cao Yu belonged to any literary group during their writing careers. However, the "expression of personal conscience and of an artistic sensitivity which was increasingly affected by their socio-political environment"⁵⁶¹ was still more or less visible in their tragic narratives at this time, thus connecting them inevitably and homogeneously with the standpoint of literary realism. Although whether these writers reached this point "of [their] own accord[s] or under leftist pressure"⁵⁶² is unclear, these three examples are demonstrations of the divergence between the theoretical discussions and literary practice of *the tragic* in the 1930s, in which the former was more tolerant with voices cutting across different literary groups, while the latter remained largely unified by the hegemony of the political discourse.

⁵⁶⁰ Ge Guilu, "Cao Yu *Leiyu* – huigui dao '*Leiyu xu*' de yitu jieshi" (Cao Yu's Thunderstorm – Return to the revelation of intentions in "Preface to Thunderstorm"), in *Bijiao wenxue zhilu: jiaoliu shiye yu chanshi fangfa* (The road of comparative literature: communicative vision and the interpretative approach) (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 2014), 283.

⁵⁶¹ Lee, "Road to Revolution," 445.

⁵⁶² Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 180.

IV The 1940s: The War and the Politically-oriented Literature (1937-1949)

The third decade in the history of modern Chinese literature is marked by the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War in 1937, and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The current literary histories differ little on the periodisation of this phase, as “the fundamental feature of the cultural and political trend of ‘the literature of the forties’ [*sishi niandai wenxue*] was determined by the war situation”,⁵⁶³ which “enhanced the connection between literature and the times, the society, and politics”.⁵⁶⁴ The main theme of modern Chinese literature during this period, as described by later scholars, changed significantly from the previous phases in that the “cultural awareness of ideological enlightenment was replaced by strong political and class consciousness, the advocacy of individualism by the promotion of collectivism, and the exploration of the relation between literature and life by the heated discussion of the relation among literature, revolution and politics.”⁵⁶⁵ This chapter will focus on wartime theoretical discussions of the concept of tragedy as well as on literary creations with tragic content, to investigate whether and how the Chinese appropriation of this notion in theory and practice was influenced by the change of the overall literary agenda in the 1940s.

4.1 THEORETICAL DISCUSSION: TRAGEDY AND THE WAR

Generally speaking, the theoretical construction of the concept of tragedy in the 1940s was not as prevalent as in the 1930s, because “the war put a sudden end to the

⁵⁶³ He Zhongming, “Sishi niandai wenxue yu zhengzhi wenhua zhi guanxi” (Literature of the forties and its relation to political culture), in *Fei wenxue de shiji – ershi shiji Zhongguo wenxue yu zhengzhi wenhua guanxi shilun* (The century of non-literature – On the history of 20th century Chinese literature and its relation to political culture), ed. Zhu Xiaojin (Nanjing: Nanjing shifan daxue chibanshe, 2004), 168.

⁵⁶⁴ Zhu, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shi 1917-2000, shang* (History of modern Chinese literature 1917-2000, Part 1), 261.

⁵⁶⁵ Ma Liangchun, and Zhang Daming, eds., *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sichao shi, shang* (The intellectual history of modern Chinese literature, Part 1) (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1995), 15.

fertile”⁵⁶⁶ and consistent academic research. As a result, the number of scholars engaged in the theoretical discussions of tragedy dropped during this period, and the research findings were also less productive or less systematic. On the other hand, there was nevertheless a certain consistency with the previous discussions, in that such shared focus on the critique of Chinese tragedy, on Aristotle’s theory of tragedy, and on the function of tragedy remained the primary concern for intellectuals at this time.

4.1.1 The Rejection of Chinese Tragedy

Scholars of the 1940s kept questioning the genuineness of Chinese tragedy. Tang Junyi⁵⁶⁷ touched upon this topic through a comparison between the cultural spirit of China and the West, and concluded that “there is no tragedy in Chinese fiction and drama since all the presentations of man’s miserable experience are ended with happy reunions.”⁵⁶⁸

Despite the same conclusion with the previous scholars, Tang explored the reason for the absence of Chinese tragedy in the aspect of a “moral spirit” (*daode jingshen*). To him, Chinese art and literature concentrated on moral indoctrination; it was especially the case for drama and fiction to express a thematic concern of promoting virtues and punishing evils. Given that the Chinese lacked recognition of the conflict between man’s strong willpower and some superhuman forces, “it is natural that Chinese fiction and drama always end with *Datanyuan* and the Western-style tragedy is therefore hard to be born.”⁵⁶⁹ Tang mentioned several works in traditional Chinese literature as examples to illustrate his point. He first regarded the sequels of

⁵⁶⁶ Lee, “Road to Revolution,” 445.

⁵⁶⁷ Tang Junyi (1909-1978), modern Chinese philosopher and educator; one of the major representatives of New Confucianism. His thought carried certain Western influence from Plato and Hegel.

⁵⁶⁸ Tang Junyi, “Zhongxi wenhua jingshen zhi bijiao” (Comparison between Chinese and Western cultural spirit), first published in *Dongfang yu xiwang* (East and west) 1, no. 1 (1947), reprinted in *Zhongxi wenhua yitong lun* (On the differences and similarities between Chinese and Western cultures), ed. Yu Longyu (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1989), 43.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

Honglou meng (Dream of the Red Chamber) and *Xixiang ji* (Romance of the West Chamber) with deliberate happy endings as anti-tragic, and then differentiated the concept of fate in *Shuihu zhuan* (Water Margin) and the tragic consciousness in *Honglou meng* from those in European literary tradition, considering these two novels to be non-tragic because “their characters lack strong objective [*mudi xing*]”.⁵⁷⁰ Tang’s rejection of Chinese tragedy inherited the negative attitude towards the *Datanyuan* literary pattern from the previous periods, reinforced the opposition between the Chinese literary tradition of happy reunion and the idea of the tragic.

Meanwhile, Tang also explored some cultural factors behind the absence of Chinese tragedy by contrasting certain key elements between Chinese and European cultures. Corresponding to what he called a “moral spirit” that dominated traditional Chinese literary orientation, Tang considered the “spirit of religion” (*zongjiao jingshen*) and the “spirit of science” (*kexue jingshen*) to be the essence of European culture. To Tang, these two spirits produced the European notion of the tragic, which resulted from “a tension between individual consciousness [*geren zijue*] and transpersonal consciousness [*chao geren zijue*]”.⁵⁷¹ He used these two spirits to interpret the theme of “good person received bad treatment” in European tragedies, suggesting that the spirit of religion functioned to indicate that evil and goodness went hand in hand, or the human existence was itself sinful so one needed to accept his tragedy as a punishment; while the spirit of science functioned to reveal an objective natural law operating beyond the moral system of human society, which required mankind’s full awareness of its existence.⁵⁷² However, Chinese culture, as Tang observed, lacked exactly the recognition of such a sacred, inviolable law; the *Datanyuan* complex prevailed in artistic creativity because “the law of nature [*ziran lü*] was ruled by the law of morality [*daode lü*]”.⁵⁷³

⁵⁷⁰ Tang, “Zhongxi wenhua jingshen zhi bijiao” (Comparison between Chinese and Western cultural spirit), 43.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 35-36.

⁵⁷² Ibid., 46.

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

This cultural perspective was similar to that of Zhu Guangqian and Qian Zhongshu, in terms of their analysis of the lack of tragic consciousness in Chinese literature. While all these three scholars based their observations on the comparison between Chinese and European cultures, Tang Junyi was more explicit in that he summarised certain comparable features of the two cultural traditions, offering his arguments with relatively concrete evidence.

4.1.2 The Conceptualisation of Tragedy

The theoretical construction of the concept of tragedy in the 1940s first saw a continuity of the previous research: such topics as the interpretation of Aristotle's definition of tragedy, the function of tragedy, tragic conflict, the tragic hero, and the distinction between tragedy and mere sadness received re-examination at this time. Also, there were some new perspectives in the discussion; scholars investigated the questions of how the idea of the tragic was related to one's outlook on life, and what constituted a tragic consciousness, in Chinese social and political context of the 1940s.

1) The Interpretation of Aristotle's Definition of Tragedy

Chen Shouzhū⁵⁷⁴ retained the focus on Aristotle's definition of tragedy. He considered this definition "the most telling of tragedy's attributes", and summarised it into four aspects, which were "what is tragedy", "the form of tragedy", "how tragedy affects its audience", and "the function of tragedy".⁵⁷⁵ This summary covered the major topics discussed previously.

Furthermore, Chen mentioned in particular two terms he thought essential to the understanding of Aristotle's definition. The first term was *dongzuo* (action), which

⁵⁷⁴ Chen Shouzhū (1909-1990), writer, literary critic, and translator; expert in Western dramaturgical theory and theatre studies.

⁵⁷⁵ Chen Shouzhū, "Yalisiduode lun beiju" (Aristotle on tragedy), first published in *Wenchao* (Literary trend) 3, no. 5 (1947), reprinted in *Chen Shouzhū xiju lunji, shang* (The essay collection on drama of Chen Shouzhū, Part 1), eds. Zhu Donglin, and Zhou Anhua (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999), 247.

not only referred to the “body movements” (*shenti shang de dongzuo*), but contained “a whole process from the inside out” (*zi nei zhi wai de quanbu guocheng*) carried by “every determined successful man with a contemplative state of mind who acts according to the situation”.⁵⁷⁶ Chen referenced S.H. Butcher in perceiving “action” as a presentation of the “mental life” (*neixin shenghuo*) and the “rational personality” (*lixing renge*), because “[i]t embraces not only the deeds, the incidents, the situations, but also the mental processes, and the motives which underlie the outward events or which result from them”.⁵⁷⁷ The opinion of valuing the presentation of man’s inner life was similar to Xiong Foxi’s emphasis on internal actions as an essential element of tragedy.

The second term was *zhuangzhong yansu* (seriousness), which described the “action” in tragedy. Chen mentioned several existing interpretations of “seriousness” in English scholarship, such as “High and Excellent Seriousness” by Matthew Arnold, “Grave and Great” by S.H. Butcher, and “That Matters” or “that is worth troubling about” by F.L. Lucas,⁵⁷⁸ and concluded that the senses of “solemnity” (*zhuangyan xing*) and “grandeur” (*xiongwei xing*) were the defining features of “seriousness”.⁵⁷⁹ In addition, Chen distinguished between the grandeur of the subject (*tikai de xiongwei*) and the grandeur of expression (*biaoxian fangfa de xiongwei*), regarding the latter as the key component of the grandeur of art works: “Even if the subject matter of one work is extremely common without any magnificence, it can still possess a sense of grandeur as long as the artist is able to reveal its intrinsic meaning through the most truly and profound expressions.”⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷⁶ Chen, “Yalisiduode lun beiju” (Aristotle on tragedy), 247.

⁵⁷⁷ Chen Shouzhu quoted from S.H. Butcher, *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (London: MacMillan, 1923), 337. His original texts were Chinese.

⁵⁷⁸ Chen, “Yalisiduode lun beiju” (Aristotle on tragedy), 247. He provided the original English versions to all the phrases. These critics Chen referenced here, i.e. Matthew Arnold, S.H. Butcher, and F.L. Lucas, are important figures in English intellectual field whose interpretation, critical review, and translation of classic works on tragedy are influential and often studied in later scholarship.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

In general, apart from introducing a few terms from more various sources to rephrase some key concepts discussed before, Chen Shouzhū's interpretations of Aristotle's definition followed much the research focus of the 1930s. However, as the only one to go back to Aristotle for the definition of tragedy in the 1940s, Chen's inheritance of the previous scholarship showed the lasting impact of the Aristotelian theories on the modern Chinese understanding of the concept of tragedy.

2) The Function of Tragedy

The function of tragedy remained one major concern for theoretical discussions in the 1940s. The same as in the previous periods, both the aesthetic and pragmatic perspectives were visible at this time. Cai Yi's⁵⁸¹ *Xin meixue* (New aesthetics, 1948), as its name implied, provided some "new" aesthetic readings of tragedy's function by introducing the term *meigan* (aesthetic sense) in the study of the emotional experience tragedy offered. To Cai, the aesthetic sense of tragedy was aroused not by the "realistic beauty" (*xianshi mei*) but by the "artistic beauty" (*yishu mei*).⁵⁸² He defined this aesthetic sense as "solemn and heroic" (*beizhuang*), and suggested it existed across genres: "it is not only tragedy that can arouse in us this aesthetic sense; all the other literary genres with certain social concerns [*moxie shehui mei*], such as poetry and fiction, are able to achieve this effect, too."⁵⁸³

The pragmatic views mainly concentrated on the uplifting effects tragedy produced on the audience. Tang Na,⁵⁸⁴ in response to the opinion that tragedy was inappropriate for people's state of mind in wartime, reaffirmed tragedy's role in "moving, stimulating, and encouraging the audience": "the aim to present the triumph of evil forces and the sacrifice of revolutionary forces is to make the

⁵⁸¹ Cai Yi (1906-1992), aesthetician and literary theorist; advocate of Marxist theories on aesthetics and literature.

⁵⁸² Cai Yi, *Xin meixue* (New aesthetics) (Shanghai: Qunyi chubanshe, 1948), 237.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁵⁸⁴ Tang Na (1914-1988), penname of Ma Jiliang. Theatre critic, scriptwriter, and actor.

audience think deeply and learn from these plays.”⁵⁸⁵ Cao Yu emphasised in tragedy a tragic spirit which he defined as the courage to take the initiative (*ganyu zhidong*). To Cao, the spirit of tragedy was “a vitality to persist with the efforts to march forward bravely for an independent, prosperous China”.⁵⁸⁶ Considering the temporary social and political crisis, it was a necessity to promote such a spirit among the Chinese, as it “cheers us on, makes us high-spirited, gives us courage, and leads us to the brightness and eventual success.”⁵⁸⁷

Such opinions valued the constructive role tragedy played to inspire and to encourage, expressing an overt realist socio-political concern. On the other hand, the aesthetic reading of tragedy’s emotional effect of purification and cleansing, which was greatly discussed in the 1930s, was left untouched at this time. Instead, scholars associated tragedy with a sense of solemnity and grandeur to stimulate certain inspiring sentiments among the audience, placing the concept of tragedy in tune with the pragmatic agenda of mobilising the masses in wartime China.

3) Tragic Conflict

The wartime situation strengthened the intellectual attention on tragic conflict. Cai Yi quoted French literary theorist F. Brunetière’s statement “no struggle, no drama” in regarding “conflict” (*chongtu*) as one of the essential elements of dramatic literature.⁵⁸⁸ To him, the era of tragedy came when dispute and confrontation constituted the main theme of social history.⁵⁸⁹ In line with those scholars in the 1930s, Cai also classified tragedy into three types as *mingyun de beiju* (tragedy of

⁵⁸⁵ Tang Na, “Guanyu *Lixiucheng* zhisi – yu juzuo zhe Yang Hansheng shi de tanhua” (On The Death of Li Xiucheng – A conversation with the playwright Yang Hansheng), first published in *Kangzhan xiju* (War of resistance drama) 2, nos. 4/5 (1938), reprinted in *Yang Hansheng yanjiu ziliao* (Research materials on Yang Hansheng), ed. Pan Guangwu (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 2010), 260.

⁵⁸⁶ Cao Yu, “Beiju de jingshen” (The spirit of tragedy), first published in *Chuhui fuwu* (Storage and exchange services) 25 (1942), reprinted in *Cao Yu quanji, di wu juan* (Complete works of Cao Yu, vol. 5), eds. Tian Benxiang, and Liu Yijun (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 1996), 160.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁵⁸⁸ Cai, *Xin meixue* (New aesthetics), 274. He provided the English translation to this statement.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

fate), *xingge de beiju* (tragedy of character), and *shehui beiju* (social tragedy); he held that the “genuine source [*zhenzheng de genyuan*] of tragedy” lay in the society, and defined tragedy as “a presentation of the conflicts among several social imperatives [*shehui de biran*]”.⁵⁹⁰

Cai Yi emphasised on the social origins of tragedy through exploring the causal factors of the “tragedy of fate” and the “tragedy of character” in European tragedies: he referred to Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* as an example of the former, regarding its tragic conflict as a result of the changing institution of marriage rather than the irony of fate; he mentioned Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as an example of the latter, seeing its tragic conflict as feudalism versus the bourgeoisie that was reflective of the human relationships in these two different societies, which produced the self-contradictory and indecisive character of Hamlet. To Cai, both types of tragic conflict implied certain social significance; and if one did not make this clear, “the meaning of tragedy becomes vague and ambiguous”.⁵⁹¹ Cai also provided some examples, such as *The Lady of the Camellias* by Alexandre Dumas, *The Storm* by Ostrovsky, and *A Doll’s House* by Ibsen, to illustrate what he called the “social tragedy”; he regarded tragedy of this kind a “progress” from tragedies of the past, because it explored and revealed the social origins of tragedy.⁵⁹²

Zhou Gangming⁵⁹³ also divided tragedy according to the different conflicts they represented: “the ancient Greek tragedy concentrated on the conflicts between heroes and gods, and the feudal tragedy on the conflicts between slaves and their owners; the era of the rising bourgeoisie produced conflicts between individuality and tradition, while the dominance of capitalism created conflicts between the exploited

⁵⁹⁰ Cai, *Xin meixue* (New aesthetics), 276.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 277-279.

⁵⁹² Ibid., 279-280.

⁵⁹³ Zhou Gangming (1909-1981), journalist and writer; member of League of Left-Wing Writers (*Zuoyi zuojia lianmeng*), and All-China Resistance Association of Writers and Artists (*Zhonghua quanguo wenyijie kangdi xiehui*).

and the exploiters.”⁵⁹⁴ In this regard, he shared with Cai a similar standpoint in regarding the external social factors as essential to understand tragic literature; meanwhile, neither of them mentioned the internal struggle of the protagonist, which was a major aspect of the previous discussions.

Later scholar Ma Hui places this perspective in the same breath with Engels’s comments on the historical tragedy *Franz von Sickingen* (1858),⁵⁹⁵ as Engel considered the “tragic clash” of this play the confrontation “between the historically necessary postulate and the impossibility of its execution in practice”.⁵⁹⁶ This statement was in line with Marx’s earlier opinion of regarding the two conflicting forces in tragedy as “the privileged power in the world” and “a personal fancy” of “freedom”: “So long as the ancien régime, as the existing world-order, struggled against a new world coming into existence, it was guilty of a world-historical, but not a personal, error. Its decline was, therefore, tragic.”⁵⁹⁷ In this sense, Cai Yi’s view was more explicit in carrying an influence of this Marxist theory. He divided the social forces (*shehui de li*) into two opposite kinds: one was positive (*zheng de li*) and the other was negative (*fu de li*); to him, these two forces competed to triumph over each other and thus made the conflict between them inevitable – the negative

⁵⁹⁴ Zhou Gangming, “Xia Yan juzuo lun” (On Xia Yan’s plays), first published in *Wenyi shenghuo* (Literary life) 1, no. 3 (1941), reprinted in *Xia Yan yanjiu ziliao* (Research materials on Xia Yan), eds. Hui Lin, Chen Jian, and Shao Wu (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 349.

⁵⁹⁵ A five-act historical tragedy written by the German socialist and political activist Ferdinand Lassalle. This play was based on the historical event of a failed revolt by a number of religious German knights led by Franz von Sickingen against the feudal emperor and the Catholic Church in the 16th century. Marx and Engels had different opinions to the author Lassalle regarding the reason for the failure of the revolt; see details in the letters to Lassalle by Marx and Engels, in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Volume 40. Letters 1856-59*, eds., Jack Cohen, Maurice Cornforth, Maurice Dobb, E. J. Hobsbawm, James Klugmann, and Margaret Mynatt (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010).

⁵⁹⁶ Frederick Engels, “Engels to Ferdinand Lassalle,” in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Volume 40. Letters 1856-59*, eds., Jack Cohen, Maurice Cornforth, Maurice Dobb, E. J. Hobsbawm, James Klugmann, and Margaret Mynatt (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010), 445. See Ma Hui’s discussion in *Minzu beiju yishi yu geti yishu biaoqian* (The national tragic consciousness and individual artistic presentation), 55-56.

⁵⁹⁷ Karl Marx, “Introduction of A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’,” in *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*, trans. Annette Jolin, and Joseph O’Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 134.

force had its legitimacy for a temporary overpowering while the positive force was sure to prevail with a coming bright future.⁵⁹⁸ In this case, “tragedy appears at a time when the old society still necessarily exists and the new society is sure to emerge soon; the immaturity of the upcoming new society certainly produces some personal destruction, which we call tragedies.”⁵⁹⁹ This vision saw tragedy as “a disharmony of disproportion between the hero’s ambitions and the time in which he lives”;⁶⁰⁰ it emphasised the “progressive” feature of tragedy, and applied well into the context of revolution and social advancement in the 1940s China.

4) Tragic Hero

The perception of the tragic hero in the 1940s greatly valued the lofty ideal and the indefatigable spirit which fitted into the needs of wartime. Chen Shouzhu noticed particularly in Aristotle’s definition his “emphasis on the greatness of the tragic hero in terms of character [*renpin*] rather than status [*diwei*]”, and held that those later interpretations of Aristotle’s advocacy of tragedy’s concern with emperors and big events (*diwang dashi*) were misreading.⁶⁰¹ In addition, Chen suggested that the ordinary people could take on the role of the tragic hero in modern times; this opinion echoed those of Ma Yanxiang and Zhang Min in the 1930s, but Chen did not further illustrate this point with convincing examples.

According to Cao Yu, the tragic hero ought to have the spirit of “rather die than submit” (*ningsi buqu*).⁶⁰² He mentioned several essential factors for this quality: the first was a flame of enthusiasm to pursue and strive for the lofty ideal at all costs, which was an excellent exhibition of one’s manliness; the second was noble ambition that was insusceptible to the self-centred outlook on life, since one’s efforts to realise

⁵⁹⁸ Cai, *Xin meixue* (New aesthetics), 276.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid., 280.

⁶⁰⁰ Paul Delany, “*King Lear* and the Decline of Feudalism,” in *Materialist Shakespeare: A History*, ed. Ivo Kamps (London: Verso, 1995), 32.

⁶⁰¹ Chen, “Yalisiduode lun beiju” (Aristotle on tragedy), 248.

⁶⁰² Cao, “Beiju de jingshen” (The spirit of tragedy), 154.

the goal was much beyond the narrow concern of the self (*xiaowo*); the third was the imposing manner (*xiongwei de qipo*) to fight for the existence of the nation, as the Chinese needed to stand up for national salvation.⁶⁰³ Also, Cao found in the defeated tragic hero “a great soul” and proposed to abandon the conception of “the winner takes all” (*shengzhe wanghou baizhe kou*), because it was “right or wrong” (*shifei*) rather than “success or failure” (*chengbai*) that determined the greatness of the tragic hero, who “sees the truth [*zhenli*] from his failure and fight for it”.⁶⁰⁴ In this respect, Cao valued in the tragic hero a “good nature” (*meili de pinde*) that was “not affected by success or failure, nor by gains and losses”: “their [the tragic heroes] defeats were not due to the wrong paths they had taken, but because of various restrictions from external circumstances. [...] Temporary setbacks did not prevent them from proceeding without hesitation to pursue truth to the end.”⁶⁰⁵ Here, Cao’s focus was also placed on the greatness of the character; his concern about the fighting spirit of the tragic hero was in line with that of Bing Xin, which was to encourage the public to struggle persistently for independence and the realisation of their ideals.

Furthermore, Cao Yu insisted on a distinction between tragedy and the mere sadness in daily life. To him, the real meaning of tragedy was lost due to the indiscriminate use of this word in his time;⁶⁰⁶ those plays presenting personal misfortunes that were irrelevant to the nation or the society were not tragedies, because “the real tragedy is by no means the commonplace sadness caused by the lack of clothes or food”, but “should be much more profound to be separated from such self-centred interests”.⁶⁰⁷ This opinion shared the same standpoint with the earlier views of Xu Zhimo, Bing Xin, and Xiong Foxi, in that they all contrasted people’s existential experience at the material and secular level to that of the spiritual level.

⁶⁰³ Cao, “Beiju de jingshen” (The spirit of tragedy), 159-160.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid., 160.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., 160-161.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., 160.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid., 154.

5) The Outlook on Life of Tragedy and Tragic Consciousness

There were also some new aspects in interpreting the concept of tragedy at this time. Chen Shouzhong elaborated on what he called the “outlook on life of tragedy” (*beiju de rensheng guan*) through three aspects: the first was the recognition of life’s meaning and value, from which “our courage arises to fight for the overcoming of all difficulties”; the second was the faith in man’s free will (*ziyou yizhi*), as “tragic heroes take actions with determined minds and brave hearts even though it seems impossible to succeed”; the third was the ambition to strive to the end for the realisation of the ideal, and “this kind of spirit is fully revealing of the beauty of solemn and grandeur in man’s life”.⁶⁰⁸ Chen valued the third aspect the most and explained it further this way: “The tragic hero, despite his defeat, was nevertheless glorious and respectable. Upon watching tragedies, we feel not only frightened towards the dark forces but also admiration for the dramatic characters; besides, we realise how cherishable life is, and how the ideal is worthy of pursuing.”⁶⁰⁹ In this sense, Chen defined the outlook on life of tragedy as not a passive attitude to accept one’s destiny, but an active demeanour to strive to achieve one’s goal: “tragedy is the outcome of an ambitious man’s active fighting against his fate or the environment; [...] we are not able to observe the obstacles if we just reconcile ourselves to the situation, nor are we qualified in this case for the ceaseless struggles that produce tragedies.”⁶¹⁰

Tang Junyi defined the “tragic consciousness” (*beiju yishi*) as “an awareness of the tension between self-consciousness [*geren zijue*] and superhuman consciousness [*chao geren zijue*]”. As a result, tragedy arose from the moment when “the subjective awareness submits to objectivity” (*zhuguan zijue qufu yu keguan*).⁶¹¹ Tang went further to analyse different types of tragedies in this theoretical frame, and

⁶⁰⁸ Chen, “Yalisiduode lun beiju” (Aristotle on tragedy), 252-253.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., 253.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., 251.

⁶¹¹ Tang, “Zhongxi wenhua jingshen zhi bijiao” (Comparison between Chinese and Western cultural spirit), 36.

considered the “tragedy of fate” to be produced by “man’s subjective will in submitting to the objective will of god or fate”; the “tragedy of character” by “man’s subjective will in submitting to his character which is determined by heredity prior to the emergence of his consciousness”; and the “social tragedy” by “man’s subjective will in submitting to the objective rules of social structure”.⁶¹² This illustration provided additional explanations for the three types of tragedy frequently discussed in the 1930s and 1940s. Consequently, the introduction of such new terms as “tragic consciousness”, as well as of “the outlook on life of tragedy”, to some extent enlarged the horizon of modern Chinese interpretation of the concept of tragedy, and made inspiring contributions to the existing theories.

4.1.3 Summary

On the whole, the theoretical construction of the concept of tragedy in the 1940s followed mainly the traces of the previous scholarly discussion. The pragmatic and aesthetic interpretations remained observable at this time. Such discussions as the comparison between Chinese and European cultural spirit, the interpretation of Aristotle’s definition, and the aesthetic sense of tragedy, were on the whole formulated at an aesthetic or non-utilitarian level. However, the emphasis on tragedy’s function as a spiritual encouragement and motivation, the exploration of the social origins of tragic conflict, and the promotion of the outlook on life of tragedy to guide mankind’s struggle against the external environment, carried an overt viewpoint of pragmatic realism, which was in accordance with the prevailing socio-political issues. These two perspectives overlapped at a certain point, where the aesthetic interest was taken over by the pragmatic concern about social reality. Cai Yi’s opinions served as a case in point, as he devoted much discussion from the standpoint of literary realism about the social factors that produced the tragic conflict between man and environment, rather than developing more with the aesthetic analysis of tragedy’s artistic features as suggested by the name of his book.

⁶¹² Tang, “Zhongxi wenhua jingshen zhi bijiao” (Comparison between Chinese and Western cultural spirit), 36.

In fact, it was common among scholars in the 1940s to possess both the political and aesthetic perspectives in their interpretations of the concept of tragedy; similar examples were Cao Yu and Chen Shouzhong, whose aesthetic readings of tragedy were accompanied by deep concern over the destiny of the nation. As a result, different from the literary scene in the previous decades, scholars talking about tragedy in the 1940s could not be simply divided into the group of pragmatic realists and the group of non-utilitarian aestheticians. This was partly due to the outbreak of war which, as described by Leo Ou-fan Lee, formed “[a]n unprecedented unity among literary intellectuals” across the whole nation; as a result, division among different literary camps “disappeared almost overnight”, when “[a]ll slogans were submerged under the resounding call to ‘the war of resistance’ (*k’ang-chan*)”.⁶¹³ Also, the introduction of Marxist theories in literary criticism at this time provided a historical materialist interpretation of tragic conflict and the origin of tragedy, causing the concept of tragedy to be largely interpreted through a political viewpoint to serve as a response to the call of the times.

The pressing war situation and the reception of Marxism made the discourse on tragedy in the 1940s closely in tune with the overall literary proposition at this time, which emphasised on literature’s uplifting effects on people’s spirit of resistance. Scholars such as Zhou Gangming, Cao Yu, and Chen Shouzhong highlighted a positive and optimistic mood in tragedy as an encouragement for the people to win the war; consequently, the idea of the tragic in the 1940s was interpreted mainly as a sense of bravery and solemnity. This perception was the opposite to that of the 1930s which considered tragedy as a presentation of the destined defeat of a struggling man, and also to that of the 1920s which equalled tragedy with the miserable social realities – both of which stressed the sad and grievous tone of the tragic sense. In this respect, Cai Yi’s faith in the irresistible triumph of the positive social force, regardless of its temporary defeat in the struggle against the negative social force, carried a similar

⁶¹³ Lee, “Road to Revolution,” 466.

optimistic tone.

In addition, the functional view of tragedy as a tool for political agitation was in accordance with what Mao Zedong had promoted in his speech at Yan'an, saying that "[l]iterature and art are subordinate to politics".⁶¹⁴ This statement left a profound impact on the literary creativity of the communist writers and artists both in wartime and for a considerably long period of time after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. According to Kirk Denton, Mao's view of "a political/moral role for literature" was "not at odds with the May Fourth tradition" in its perception of "writing's power to transform values" as well as of "literature as [being] a 'tool' of politics".⁶¹⁵ Therefore, to see tragedy and the tragic spirit as a way to inspire, to mobilise, and to encourage the public masses shared a similar objective with that of the 1920s in the advocacy of tragedy's constructive role in social enlightenment and transformation, serving as a case in point to show how literature was adopted as a vehicle for the propagation of the political agenda of the 1940s China.

4.2 LITERARY CREATIVITY: THE PERFORMANCE OF A WAR EXPERIENCE

The literary practice of *the tragic* in wartime China mainly focused on such themes as anti-aggression, patriotism, resistance, and national salvation. The two major trends of realism and romanticism remained visible during this period, as both traditions of a faithful presentation of social reality and the playwrights' overt engagement of personal subjectivity were maintained and enriched with new examples. Yet, new development was also palpable: there was an attempt to converge the realist and romantic features in both the authors' writing practice and in the contemporary reviews, which was driven by the deep concern about the prevailing

⁶¹⁴ Mao Zedong, "Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotan hui shang de jianghua" (Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art), first published in *Jiefang ribao* (Jiefang daily), October 19, 1943. English translation taken from Kirk A. Denton, ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature 1893-1945* (California: Stanford University Press, 1996), 474.

⁶¹⁵ Kirk A. Denton, "Literature and Politics: Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature'," in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, ed. Joshua S. Mostow (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 467-468.

national imperatives.

4.2.1 The Inheritance of the Tradition of Realism

One notable feature of the literary creativity of the 1940s was the tragic expression of the wartime experience of the Chinese people. For one thing, this was because of the pressing national crisis that plunged people into huge calamities, which provided abundant potential sources of inspiration for writers, namely, “trouble times produce tragedy” (*luanshi chu beiju*);⁶¹⁶ for another, it also had something to do with the contemporary theoretical discussions which saw tragedy as a tool to motivate the people to fight for national independence. Guo Moruo’s account of his writing experience of historical tragedies at this time demonstrated this point. To him, “tragedy surpasses comedy in its instructional significance”, which could arouse among the audience “full sense of righteousness to repress the evil forces” and called for “heroic struggles to overcome all kinds of difficulties to gain the final victory”.⁶¹⁷ These two aspects left direct and instant impact on tragic narratives of the 1940s, in a way that both the presentation of common people’s miserable life and the advocacy of a spirit of resistance became popular themes for literary practice.

1) The Presentation of Life’s Miseries

The tragic narratives of the 1940s firstly inherited from the previous periods – especially the New Culture Movement – the counter-*Datanyuan* tradition in its emphasis on a faithful demonstration of social reality. This literary realist perspective was prominent in wartime writings, as an increasing number of authors began “to face directly and bravely those tragic conflicts in real life, making the tribulations of Chinese society and the oppression of people’s spiritual life the main subject of

⁶¹⁶ Shao Zengqi, “Shitan gudian xiqu zhong de beiju” (Discussion of tragedy in traditional opera), in *Zhongguo gudian beiju xiju lunji* (Essay collection of the discussion of traditional Chinese tragedy and comedy) (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1983), 23.

⁶¹⁷ Guo Moruo, “You Hufu shuodao beiju jingshen” (Speaking of the spirit of tragedy from The tiger tally), first published in *Fujian ribao* (Fujian daily), August 4, 1951, reprinted in *Guo Moruo quanji, wenxue bian, di shiqi juan* (Complete works of Guo Moruo, literature, vol. 17) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1989), 257-258.

literature”.⁶¹⁸ In terms of the thematic concern, the destruction of the innocent poor and the underclass, as well as the decline and collapse of the big feudal family, remained noticeable at this time. In this regard, Lao She’s *Luotuo Xiangzi* (Rickshaw Boy, 1937) and Cao Yu’s *Beijing ren* (Peking Man, 1941) were two examples.

Lao She’s⁶¹⁹ *Luotuo Xiangzi*⁶²⁰ is an example of the first theme, depicting a good-natured young man’s struggle to make a living, as well as his moral decline and spiritual destruction during this process. In the novel, Xiangzi comes to the city from the countryside and works hard as a rickshaw boy, hoping for a better and stable life. However, all along he is kept far away from realising his dream: the rickshaw he buys after three years’ labour is robbed by a gang of soldiers; he manages to escape and starts to save money for another one, but gets blackmailed soon after. The daughter of the rickshaw factory, Huniu, seduces Xiangzi into an unhappy marriage at the expense of a rickshaw of his own. Yet she soon dies in childbirth, and Xiangzi becomes once again penniless after selling his rickshaw to cover the costs for the funeral. The hardships he has gone through gradually disillusion Xiangzi and drag him into the abyss of demoralisation. Devoid of a purpose in life, Xiangzi is in the end totally reduced to an idle and parasitic hooligan and merges with the ugliness of the city’s dark side.

This novel has an obvious affinity with the depictions of the “shattered commonplace” in Lu Xun’s short stories written in the 1920s. Similarly, the contemporary opinions in the main regarded it as the telling of “the ordinary people

⁶¹⁸ Ma, *Minzu beiju yishi yu geti yishu biaoqian* (The national tragic consciousness and individual artistic presentation), 76.

⁶¹⁹ Lao She (1899-1966), penname of Shu Qingchun. Novelist and dramatist; one of the most significant writers in modern Chinese literature. Major works include novels: *Maocheng ji* (Cat Country, 1932), *Luotuo Xiangzi* (Rickshaw Boy, 1936), *Sishi tongtang* (Four Generations under One Roof, 1944-1948); dramas: *Longxu gou* (Dragon Beard Ditch, 1950), and *Chaguan* (Teahouse, 1957).

⁶²⁰ A novel depicting how a kind and honest rickshaw puller had his good life expectations disillusioned in a society of indifference and oppression. First published in *Yuzhou feng* (Cosmic wind) 25-41, September 1936 – May 1937, reprinted in *Lao She quanji, san, xiaoshuo* (Complete works of Lao She, vol. 3, fiction) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2013), 1-216.

and their ordinary doings”;⁶²¹ hence Xiangzi “a typical example of a group of the hard-working underclass”⁶²² which constituted a majority of the Chinese population before and during the war. But critics differed on the causal factors for the tragedy of Xiangzi. Bi Shutang⁶²³ saw a certain stubbornness in Xiangzi’s character, because he relied too much on his strong body and good will in striving for a living in society, which was “far from enough”; rather, Bi suggested that it was only through persistent struggles that one could survive in a harsh environment: “he may fail even if he struggles, but the failure is nevertheless worthwhile; he is destined to fail if he compromises, which is nothing but futile.”⁶²⁴

Ji Li,⁶²⁵ Situ Ke, and Xu Jie,⁶²⁶ on the other hand, held that the society should be responsible for the downfall of Xiangzi. Ji referred to the tragedy of Xiangzi as “fatalism” (*dingming lun*) “determined by the society”, because “there is simply no way for Xiangzi and people like him to get rid of their tragedies as long as the whole nation is under oppression”.⁶²⁷ Situ regarded Xiangzi as an innocent victim of the society which “produces all the fortunes and misfortunes” for him;⁶²⁸ and Lao She, by portraying such a typical protagonist, performed his duty as an author to “reveal the darkness of the society to awaken the people and to reform the national character”.⁶²⁹ Xu on the one hand agreed with Bi in considering Xiangzi as an “individualist” (*geren zhuyi zhe*), on the other hand blamed the society for making

⁶²¹ Ji Li, “Du Luotuo Xiangzi” (Reading Rickshaw Boy), *Lu Xun feng* (Lu Xun trend) 14 (1939): 184.

⁶²² Situ Ke, “Ping Luotuo Xiangzi” (Comments on Rickshaw Boy), *Zhongguo wenyi* (Chinese literature and arts) 1, no. 6 (1940): 52.

⁶²³ Bi Shutang (1900-1983), writer and translator, member of Chinese Democratic League (*Zhongguo minzhu tongmeng*).

⁶²⁴ Bi Shutang, “Luotuo Xiangzi” (Rickshaw Boy), *Yuzhou feng, yikan* (Comic wind, second edition) 5, May 1 (1939): 229.

⁶²⁵ Ji Li (1916-2003), penname of Zhou Li’an, editor of *Yuzhou feng* (Cosmic wind) at the time.

⁶²⁶ Xu Jie (1901-1993), writer, educator, literary critic; member of The Literary Association (*Wenxue yanjiu hui*), advocate of theories of proletarian literature.

⁶²⁷ Ji, “Du Luotuo Xiangzi” (Reading Rickshaw Boy), 184.

⁶²⁸ Situ, “Ping Luotuo Xiangzi” (Comments on Rickshaw Boy), 52.

⁶²⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

him a “miserable ghost”, as “individualism dooms to destruction in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal China”.⁶³⁰ The difference between these two views can be interpreted as a debate over whether the internal or the external factors are more important in producing the tragedy of Xiangzi. Both views carry the same perspective of realism; even the analysis of the personal fault of Xiangzi does not isolate him from the social and political environment he lives in.

Later discussions maintain such a divergence of opinions and also in general place this novel into the domain of literary realism. For scholars who focus on the internal factors, individualism is not a feasible approach for the labouring people to break away from the exploitation and oppression in old China; rather, “the unarmed proletarians without any means of production can only emancipate themselves under the help of the collective power”.⁶³¹ According to C.T. Hsia, this idea is revealed in the last paragraph of the novel,⁶³² when Lao She concluded the lifetime of Xiangzi and indicated that “in a sick society, it requires some form of collective action to improve the lot of the proletariat, and that any member of that class, in trying to better himself by his own effort, merely hastens his own ruin”.⁶³³ This conclusion states “forcefully the fact that individual efforts can by no means change the fate of the underclass” in the old China,⁶³⁴ and attributes the tragedy of Xiangzi to his

⁶³⁰ Xu Jie, “Lun *Luotuo Xiangzi*” (On Rickshaw Boy), *Wenyi xinji* (New collection of literature and arts) 1 (1948): 36.

⁶³¹ Si Qi, “*Luotuo Xiangzi* jianlun” (A brief discussion of Rickshaw Boy), in *Lao She yanjiu ziliao huibian* (Collection of research materials on Lao She) (Jinan: Shangdong shifan xueyuan zhongwenxi, 1960), 47.

⁶³² “Respectable, ambitious, idealistic, self-serving, individualistic, robust and mighty Xiangzi took part in untold numbers of burial processions but could not predict when he would bury himself, when he would lay this degenerate, selfish, hapless product of a sick society, this miserable ghost of individualism, to rest.” Lao She, *Luotuo Xiangzi* (Rickshaw Boy), in *Lao She wenji, di san juan* (Collected works of Lao She, vol. 3) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2013), 228. English translation taken from *Rickshaw Boy: A Novel*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 300.

⁶³³ Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 185.

⁶³⁴ Fan Jun, “Lun *Luotuo Xiangzi* de xianshi zhuyi – jinian Lao She xiansheng bashi danchen” (On the realism of Rickshaw Boy – In commemoration of the eightieth anniversary of the birth of Mr. Lao She), first published in *Wenxue pinglun* (Literary review) 1 (1979), reprinted in *Lao She yanjiu ziliao, xia* (Research materials on Lao She, Part 2), eds. Zeng Guangcan, and Wu Huaibin (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 589-590.

individualistic way of fighting. For scholars who emphasise the external factors, Xiangzi represents a particular group of urban “small men”,⁶³⁵ who are “victimized and corrupted by an increasingly intolerable environment”.⁶³⁶ In this case, “a society filled with darkness and irrationality”⁶³⁷ is due to “[nullify] all his efforts towards independent and honest living”,⁶³⁸ and therefore constitutes the essential aspect for the tragedy of Xiangzi. These reviews are in line with those of the Republican era in examining the socio-political conditions of the 1930s China, which reaffirm the literary realist thematic concern of this novel.

Cao Yu’s *Beijing ren*⁶³⁹ is an example of the second theme, presenting the economic decline of a once prosperous big feudal family, as well as the spiritual devastation feudalism brought to people. In this play, the Zeng family consists of three generations: the grandfather Zeng Hao who, despite the rapid change in the society, still stubbornly attempts to preserve the old traditions within the family; the elder bother Zeng Wenqing and his wife Zeng Siyi present two types of characters: the former a typical eldest son in a feudal Chinese family who fully conforms to the rules of filial piety and is reluctant to express his true feelings, while the latter a conceited, hypocritical, and calculating young mistress of the house who exhausts all her skills in controlling the whole family; the son of the Zeng couple, Zeng Ting, and his wife Zeng Ruizhen, are the youngest generation who keep struggling for freedom from those restraints and oppression of familial ethics, and have finally managed to choose their own way of living. Being placed in the sharp generational conflict and

⁶³⁵ Lee, “Road to Revolution,” 450.

⁶³⁶ Ibid., 451.

⁶³⁷ Si Ji, “Tan Lao She de Luotuo Xiangzi yu Long xu gou” (On Rickshaw Boy and Dragon Beard Ditch of Lao She), in *Lao She yanjiu ziliao huibian* (Collection of research materials on Lao She) (Jinan: Shangdong shifan xueyuan zhongwenxi, 1960), 36.

⁶³⁸ Joseph Lau, “Naturalism in Modern Chinese Fiction,” *Literature East and West* 12 (1968): 150.

⁶³⁹ A three-scene play depicting the conflicts and crisis in a declining scholar-bureaucrat feudal family in the early 1930s. First published by Chongqing wenhua shenghuo chubanshe, 1941, reprinted in *Cao Yu quanji, di er juan* (Complete works of Cao Yu, vol. 2), eds. Tian Benxiang, and Liu Yijun (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 1996), 367-539.

entangled relationships, each member of the family is a victim and at the same time the producer of someone else's tragedy, thus making this play a vivid description of people's depression and agony at the time of social chaos and transformation.

According to the contemporary views, *Beijing ren* was "an exposure and a satire of the old feudal system and people living under it";⁶⁴⁰ it concentrated on presenting the "decadence, breakdown, torment, desperate struggle, and secret sins in the big feudal family",⁶⁴¹ reflecting "the tragic fate of a declining Chinese feudal society".⁶⁴² Critics greatly valued the realist significance of this play in making "the big family an epitome of the old society";⁶⁴³ therefore, the revelation of the darkness of the Zeng family served as "a sudden wake-up call to the audience offering a profound insight into the society",⁶⁴⁴ or "the confidence among the oppressed towards a bright, new life".⁶⁴⁵

On the other hand, there were criticisms on Cao Yu's way of expressing his thematic concern. Hu Feng⁶⁴⁶ held that the Zeng family was portrayed as a more or less "isolated" group with some rather "simple characters"; instead of being more related to the feudal forces in a wider social context of the national struggle, the Zengs confined all their mental activities "strictly to within the family", and "shut all

⁶⁴⁰ Mao Dun, "Du *Beijing ren*" (Reading Peking Man), first published in *Jiefang riban* (Jiefang daily), August 12, 1942, reprinted in *Cao Yu yanjiu ziliao, xia* (Research materials on Cao Yu, Part 2), eds. Tian Benxiang, and Hu Shuhe (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1991), 1033.

⁶⁴¹ Hu Feng, "Lun Cao Yu de *Beijing ren*" (On Cao Yu's Peking Man), *Qingnian wenyi* (Literature and art for youth) 1, no. 1 (1942): 25.

⁶⁴² Shao Quanlin, "*Beijing ren* yu *Buleicaofu*" (Peking Man and Egor Bulychev and Others), *Qingnian wenyi* (Literature and art for youth) 1, no.2 (1942): 30.

⁶⁴³ Xi Ping, "Guanyu *Beijing ren*" (On Peking Man), first published in *Xinhua ribao* (Xinhua daily), February 6, 1942, reprinted in *Cao Yu yanjiu ziliao, xia* (Research materials on Cao Yu, Part 2), eds. Tian Benxiang, and Hu Shuhe (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1991), 1022.

⁶⁴⁴ Mao, "Du *Beijing ren*" (Reading Peking Man), 1033.

⁶⁴⁵ Xi, "Guanyu *Beijing ren*" (On Peking Man), 1021.

⁶⁴⁶ Hu Feng (1902-1985), literary critic, social activist, member of League of Left-Wing Writers (*Zuoyi zuojia lianmeng*); being criticised by the Communist Party for promoting petty-bourgeois individualism in the 1950s, gets redressed in the 1980s.

the social connections and tides of time behind the door”.⁶⁴⁷ Shao Quanlin⁶⁴⁸ agreed with this judgement, considering it was “not explicit enough for the audience to observe a concrete relation between the tragic fate of the Zeng family and the tragic fate of the society”.⁶⁴⁹ To Shao, it was a typical problem for Cao Yu to “always over-emphasise the importance of the fate of an individual”, without “paying enough attention to the connection between personal fate and the fate of the society and the class”.⁶⁵⁰ In order to illustrate his point, Shao compared *Beijing ren* with the play *Egor Bulychev and Others* (1932)⁶⁵¹ by Maxim Gorky, and concluded that Cao Yu was not as good as Gorky in presenting some more profound social significance and complicated conflicts through the demonstration of a personal experience.⁶⁵² Shao’s critique highlighted his intention to build up a connection between “*the tragic* on the artistic level” and “*the tragic* in the social aspect”,⁶⁵³ hence echoing those previous opinions in associating *the tragic* with the truthful presentation of social issues.

2) The Advocacy of a Fighting Spirit

Modern Chinese drama flourished in the 1940s: the number of scripts and dramatic societies increased greatly, with particular cities such as Chongqing, Guilin, and Shanghai becoming the bases for theatrical performances and drama movements.⁶⁵⁴ Later literary historians ascribe this popularity of drama to its strong emotional

⁶⁴⁷ Hu, “Lun Cao Yu de *Beijing ren*” (On Cao Yu’s Peking Man), 27-29.

⁶⁴⁸ Shao Quanlin (1906-1971), literary critic, writer, social activist; an early member of the Communist Party, participated in many major social and political campaigns in the 1930s and 1940s.

⁶⁴⁹ Shao, “*Beijing ren* yu *Buleicaofu*” (Peking Man and Egor Bulychev and Others), 34-35.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

⁶⁵¹ A play written by Maxim Gorky in 1932, telling a story of how a businessman Bulychev makes his career by hardworking, and his disillusionment with the capitalist class on the edge of a social transformation.

⁶⁵² Shao, “*Beijing ren* yu *Buleicaofu*” (Peking Man and Egor Bulychev and Others), 35-36.

⁶⁵³ Hu, “Lun Cao Yu de *Beijing ren*” (On Cao Yu’s Peking Man), 29.

⁶⁵⁴ See details in *Zhongguo xiandai xiju shigao* (History of Modern Chinese Drama), eds. Chen Baichen, and Dong Jian (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1989), 447-450.

appeal coming from its direct interaction with the audience,⁶⁵⁵ which echoed the “increasing emphasis on the significance of one’s audience”⁶⁵⁶ among modern Chinese writers at this time. Compared with other literary genres, drama had thus a natural advantage in “promoting war efforts”⁶⁵⁷ to the public, hence its leading position as “the most powerful literary medium”⁶⁵⁸ in wartime China.

The history play constituted a major form for the new dramatic expression of *the tragic* at this time. As later literary historians have observed, the writing of history plays entered its peak period when the war reached a stalemate from 1938 onwards.⁶⁵⁹ This was largely due to the tightening-up of the Nationalist Party’s control over literary creativity as a result of the change through the war situation,⁶⁶⁰ making the history play, as Guo Moruo recalled, an important part of the post-1941⁶⁶¹ Chinese drama,⁶⁶² when writers in both the occupied areas and the great interior would choose “to sidestep censorship regulations and still make oblique

⁶⁵⁵ He, “Sishi niandai wenxue yu zhengzhi wenhua zhi guanxi” (Literature of the forties and its relation to political culture), 251.

⁶⁵⁶ Lee, “Road to Revolution,” 474.

⁶⁵⁷ Mair, *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, 863-864.

⁶⁵⁸ Lee, “Road to Revolution,” 474.

⁶⁵⁹ Statistics show there was a remarkable increase in the proportion of history topics in drama creativity during this period. See Tian Jin, “Kangzhan banian lai de xiju chuanguo – yige tongji ziliao” (Dramatic creation in the eight-year Anti-Japanese War – A statistical information), first published in *Xinhua ribao* (Xinhua daily), January 16, 1946, reprinted in *Zhongguo jinxindai chuban shiliao, xiandai ding pian, xia* (Historical materials of modern Chinese publication, modern period vol. 4, Part 2), ed. Zhang Jinglu (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2003), 460-462.

⁶⁶⁰ See details in Qian, Wen, and Wu, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshi nian* (Three decades in modern Chinese literature), 627; Lee, “Road to Revolution,” 468-469.

⁶⁶¹ In January 1941, the Wannan Incident (*Wannan shibian*) (or known as the New Fourth Army Incident) took place, which broke the alliance between the Nationalists and the Communists in their cooperation against the Japanese. Starting from 1941, the Nationalist government launched several military attacks on the Communists, together with a series of restrictions on news media, publishing, and freedom of speech in its politically-controlled areas.

⁶⁶² Guo Moruo, “Tan lishi ju – zai Shanghai shili xiju xuexiao yanjiang” (On history plays – A speech at Shanghai Drama School), first published in *Wenhui bao* (Shanghai) (Wenhui newspaper, Shanghai), June 26 & 28, 1946, reprinted in *Guo Moruo lun chuanguo* (Guo Moruo on literary creation), ed. Zhang Chenghuan (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1983), 506.

comments on contemporary events”.⁶⁶³ This purpose of narrating the past in alluding to the present was much the same as that of Guo Moruo’s historical trilogy written in the 1920s⁶⁶⁴, in terms of a shared thematic concern over certain historical events of universal significance that linked the past with the present. Yet, playwrights at this time placed their focus on a wider range of historical periods for their creative inspiration; certain eras in Chinese history that had similar chaotic socio-political circumstances, such as the Warring States period (475-221 BC), the Southern Ming Dynasty (1644-1662), and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1851-1864), all became recurring themes for history plays of the 1940s.

There are a few examples to illustrate this point. First are Guo Moruo’s six history plays, namely, *Tangdi zhi hua* (Wild cherry blossoms, 1941),⁶⁶⁵ *Qu Yuan* (Qu Yuan, 1942),⁶⁶⁶ *Hufu* (The tiger tally, 1942),⁶⁶⁷ *Gao Jianli* (Gao Jianli, 1942),⁶⁶⁸ *Kongque dan* (The peacock gall, 1942),⁶⁶⁹ and *Nanguan cao* (South crown grass, 1943),⁶⁷⁰ which are “the best-known pieces” of this genre in wartime China.⁶⁷¹ In

⁶⁶³ Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 320.

⁶⁶⁴ The historical trilogy written by Guo Moruo in the 1920s, namely, *Sange panni de nüxing* (Three rebellious women, 1926), is a drama collection consisted of three historical plays: *Zhuo Wenjun* (Zhuo Wenjun, 1923), *Wang Zhaojun* (Wang Zhaojun, 1923), and *Nie Ying* (Nie Ying, 1925). The three plays focus respectively on three female characters from different periods of Chinese history, depicting their spirit of resistance against feudal ethics and their striving for personal liberation.

⁶⁶⁵ A five-scene play. First published by Chongqing zuojia shuwu, 1942, reprinted in *Moruo wenji, di san juan* (Essay collection of Moruo, vol. 3) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1957), 82-163.

⁶⁶⁶ A five-scene play. First published in *Zhongyang ribao* (Central daily), 24 January – 7 February, 1942, reprinted in *Moruo wenji, di san juan* (Essay collection of Moruo, vol. 3) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1957), 197-305.

⁶⁶⁷ A five-scene play. First published by Chongqing qunyi chubanshe, 1942, reprinted in *Moruo wenji, di san juan* (Essay collection of Moruo, vol. 3) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1957), 332-448.

⁶⁶⁸ A five-scene play. First published in *Xiju chungqiu* (Theatre annals) 2, no. 4 (1942), reprinted in *Moruo wenji, di si juan* (Essay collection of Moruo, vol. 4) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1957), 4-113.

⁶⁶⁹ A four-scene play. First published in *Wenxue chuanguo* (Literary creation) 1, no. 6 (1943), reprinted in *Moruo wenji, di si juan* (Essay collection of Moruo, vol. 4) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1957), 132-244.

⁶⁷⁰ A five-scene play. First published by Chongqing qunyi chubanshe, 1944, reprinted in *Moruo wenji, di si juan* (Essay collection of Moruo, vol. 4) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1957), 298-399.

⁶⁷¹ Mair, *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, 864.

addition, such plays as *Li Xiucheng zhisi* (The death of Li Xiucheng, 1938),⁶⁷² *Tianguo chunqiu* (The spring and autumn of the Heavenly Kingdom, 1941),⁶⁷³ *Zhengqi ge* (Song of righteousness, 1942),⁶⁷⁴ and *NanMing shiju* (The Southern Ming historical cycle, 1939-1941)⁶⁷⁵ are some other popular examples. Wartime history plays of this kind placed their dramatic conflicts between the revolutionary, progressive forces and the reactionary, conservative forces, which co-existed within a society in transition; consequently, the former suffered serious setbacks due to the fact that they were not yet strong enough to triumph over the latter, and tragedy came when the good and righteous were overwhelmed by the evil.

This theme was at first sight the same as that of the 1930s, in which the tragic hero fighting against the external environment almost by himself would always end in failure (as was demonstrated by Mao Dun's *Ziye*). However, the wartime history plays had a distinctively different expression of *the tragic* in terms of the emotional effect it aimed to produce on the audience: whereas some realist novels of the 1930s intended to arouse among readers a feeling of grief for the defeat of the tragic hero as well as resentment at the darkness of the society, history plays of the 1940s, through extolling a group of patriotic heroes, were more concerned with promoting the courage of struggle and resistance among the audience for national salvation. Consequently, they carried a positive and encouraging tone, which was a relatively new expression of *the tragic* for the wartime Chinese.

⁶⁷² A four-scene play written by Yang Hansheng (1902-1993), depicting the unyieldingness and heroic death of a peasant leader of the Taiping Rebellion after being captured. First published by Huazhong tushu gongsi, 1938.

⁶⁷³ A six-scene play written by Yang Hansheng (1902-1993), presenting horrifying political infighting caused by the internal divisions among the ruling members of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. First published by Qunyi chubanshe, 1949.

⁶⁷⁴ A four-scene play written by Wu Zuguang (1917-2003), presenting the heroic death of the patriotic poet We Tianxiang in the Southern Song Dynasty to his dying country. First published by Wenyi jiangzhu jin guanli weiyuan hui (The Management Committee of Grant for Literature and Art), 1942.

⁶⁷⁵ A series of history plays written by Qian Xingcun (A Ying) (1900-1977), including *Bixue hua* (Blood-stained flowers, 1939), *Haiguo yingxiong* (Hero of an ocean realm, 1940), and *Yang E zhuan* (The story of Yang E, 1941), telling heroic stories of the common people fighting against the Manchu invasion during the Southern Ming period.

Contemporary critics in the main recognised this effort and greatly valued the literary realist significance of these plays. They held that the playwrights succeeded in “faithfully recording the true history while at the same time highlighting those historical events as wake-up calls to the present society”.⁶⁷⁶ As a result, those “tragedies of the times” in history on the one hand stimulated “people’s reverence for the country” as they could “identify themselves deeply and concretely with the tragic heroes”,⁶⁷⁷ on the other hand also afforded the audience “some lessons crucial to the existence and continuation of the history of the Chinese nation”.⁶⁷⁸

For example, critics saw the faction between Yang Xiuqing and Wei Changhui in *Tianguo Chunqiu*⁶⁷⁹ was an oblique reference to the breakdown of the alliance between the Nationalists and the Communists, calling for a united nation “at a critical time when the whole world is drawn together to fight against the fascists”;⁶⁸⁰ whilst the portrayal of the defeated heroes, such as Li Xiucheng in *Li Xiucheng zhishi*,⁶⁸¹ Wen Tianxiang in *Zhengqi ge*,⁶⁸² and Qu Yuan in *Qu Yuan*,⁶⁸³ were

⁶⁷⁶ Tian Qin, “Ping *Zhengqi ge*” (On Song of Righteousness), *Tianxia wenzhang* (Writings of the world) 4 (1943): 104.

⁶⁷⁷ Kun Pei, “*Tianguo chunqiu*” (The spring and autumn of the Heavenly Kingdom), first published in *Dagong bao* (Shanghai), *youyi fukan* (Dagong newspaper (Shanghai), Literary supplement of Youyi), November 15, 1946, reprinted in *Yang Hansheng yanjiu ziliao* (Research materials on Yang Hansheng), ed. Pan Guangwu (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 322-323.

⁶⁷⁸ Ouyang Fanhai, “Cong *Tianguo chunqiu* tandao muqian de yanju shuiping” (From The spring and autumn of the Heavenly Kingdom to the theatrical performance standards at present), first published in *Xiju gangwei* (Drama post) 3, nos. 5-6 (1942), reprinted in *Yang Hansheng yanjiu ziliao* (Research materials on Yang Hansheng), ed. Pan Guangwu (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 290-291.

⁶⁷⁹ In this play, Yang Xiuqing, one of the leaders of the Taiping Rebellion, was set up by another leader Wei Changhui and executed despite his great contribution to the kingdom; yet Wei Changhui also got killed himself after failing his conspiracy of making more internal strife. This was known as the Tianjing Incident (*Tianjing shibian*), which marked the internal division of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and finally led it to the decline.

⁶⁸⁰ Xu Changlin, “*Tianguo chunqiu di shangyan*” (The performance of The spring and autumn of the Heavenly Kingdom), first published in *Xinhua ribao* (Xinhua daily), December 2, 1941, reprinted in *Yang Hansheng yanjiu ziliao* (Research materials on Yang Hansheng), ed. Pan Guangwu (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 287.

⁶⁸¹ In this play, Li Xincheng was portrayed as a courageous and selfless military leader who remained loyal to the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. He defended the city of Tianjing to the last against the Manchu army, and refused to surrender by committing suicide after being captured.

indicative of a “Chinese spirit” of “sacrificing one’s life for spiritual independence and freedom”, by which the Chinese were “able to resist against the invasion and even defeat the enemy although poorly equipped”.⁶⁸⁴

Later scholar Ma Hui regards this tragic sense as a combination of the sorrow (*bei*) and the sublime (*chonggao*), which embodied *the tragic* in a fighting spirit full of solemnity and grandeur: “what those tragedies revealed was not a negative, mere sadness, but a particular and positive expectation to change the society with longing for a bright future.”⁶⁸⁵ This perception of *the tragic* differed from those of the previous periods which either mournfully depicted mankind’s vain struggle against the overpowering environment (a theme mainly of the 1930s) or exposed the darkness of the society in a miserable mood (a theme mainly of the 1920s). Yet, the ultimate concern of this perception was still over the prevailing socio-political issues. In other words, the association of *the tragic* with senses of nationalism, optimism, and heroism in the 1940s conveyed again the political obsession of modern Chinese literature. The constructive role of tragedy was as the same important as being emphasised in past decades, thus the literary realist reading of *the tragic* was still omnipresent and predominant at this time.

4.2.2 The Convergence of Realism and Romanticism

⁶⁸² This play was based on the heroic deeds of the patriotic poet, Wen Tianxiang, depicting his defence of the Southern Song Dynasty against the invasion of the Mongolian army and later the Yuan Dynasty. Wen Tianxiang was a scholar-general who committed himself to protect his home country from being invaded by the Mongols. He kept fighting almost alone, several times refused inducements from the Yuan ruler after being captured, and finally was executed without yielding.

⁶⁸³ In Guo Moruo’s description, the famous Chinese poet in the Warring States period Qu Yuan was highly praised for his patriotism and righteousness. Being framed up by some traitors and forced to leave court, Qu Yuan on the one hand resisted against the unjust treatment he received, on the other hand still had deep concern about the political prospects of his home country; he expressed passionately his condemnation towards those traitors as well as the determination to keep fighting till the end.

⁶⁸⁴ Sun Fuyuan, “Du *Qu Yuan* juban” (Reading the script of Qu Yuan), first published in *Zhongyang ribao, di er ban* (Central daily news, second edition), February 7, 1942, reprinted in *Guo Moruo lun chuanguo* (Guo Moruo on literary creation), ed. Zhang Chenghuan (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1983), 744-745.

⁶⁸⁵ Ma, *Minzu beiju yishi yu geti yishu biaoqian* (The national tragic consciousness and individual artistic presentation), 74.

The rapid development and popularity of wartime history plays triggered a contemporary critical concern about how to retell history in an instructive way that made it more relevant to the present. Literary critics of the 1940s noticed two approaches in relation to this issue: one was to remain faithful to the particular times and social circumstances that produced those historical events, in order to make the analogy between the past and the present more pertinent; the other was to involve some subjective elements related to the playwrights' personal thought, feelings, and life experience, so that the reproduced historical episodes carried a modern perception and fitted better into the current socio-political context. The co-existence of these two approaches was in line with the different expressions of *the tragic* between realism and romanticism, as the former focused more on the faithfulness and objectivity concerning the functionalist aspect while the latter laid more emphasis on the subjectivity and lyricism regarding the artistic quality. In the meantime, a convergence of the realist and romantic tendencies was also remarkable; both the literary practice and criticism saw the attempt to combine these two trends, in order to better serve the need of political mobilisation of a wartime literature. In this respect, the writing purpose and contemporary reviews of Guo Moruo's history plays demonstrated this convergence well, which will be further discussed in this section.

The thematic concern of Guo's plays was distinctively realist, as he drew the materials from certain transitional eras in Chinese history, aiming at "critically presenting and examining the contemporary situations from a historical perspective".⁶⁸⁶ The Warring States period was a recurring era in the wartime history plays of Guo Moruo: *Tangdi zhihua*, based on the story from "Cike liezhuan" (Biographies of Assassins) in the *Shiji* (The Historical Records), depicts the heroic sacrifice of the Nie brother and sister of the Wei state in their resistance against Qin's military invasion; *Qu Yuan*, based on historical materials of the *Shiji* and the

⁶⁸⁶ Guo Moruo, "Guanyu lishi ju" (On history play), first published in *Fengxia* (Below the wind) 127 (1946), reprinted in *Guo Moruo lun chuanguo* (Guo Moruo on literary creation), ed. Zhang Chenghuan (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1983), 511.

Zhangguo ce (Strategies of the Warring States), presents a patriotic poet's concern for his country and the unjust treatment he received; *Hufu*, a dramatic presentation of the story "Qiefu jiuzhao" (Stealing the tally to save the Zhao) in "Xinling jun liezhuan" (Biographies of Lord Xinling) of the *Shiji*, calls for a spirit of fighting for a just cause and forging alliances across borders against external threats; *Gao Jianli*, adapted from one of the stories of "Youxia liezhuan" (Biographies of Wandering Knights) in *Shiji*, depicts a failed attempt of a wandering knight's assassination of Emperor Qin Shi Huang in revenge for his friend. These plays were thematically consistent in their main focus on anti-aggression and national unity, serving as allegories reflecting the contemporary political situation of wartime China. In this respect, Guo Moruo's later account of his writing purpose of *Qu Yuan* clearly expressed his intention:

I wrote this play [...] at the darkest time in Chongqing – the heart of the Nationalist Party's regime. I saw a variety of tragedies of the times when the Chinese society was facing a fundamental transformation. [...] I therefore brought back to life the anger in Qu Yuan's times which kept torturing all the progressive Chinese in our time. In other words, the times of Qu Yuan's in my plays embodied the times of ours.⁶⁸⁷

However, Guo Moruo expressed his literary realist thematic concern in a romantic way that involved a strong sense of poetic lyricism. Compared with the above mentioned realist novels and plays written during the same period, Guo Moruo's wartime history plays appear to be less complex in plot structure but more distinctive in the passionate expression of emotions. His frequent use of lengthy monologues that are "highly lyrical and imaginative"⁶⁸⁸ reveals the profundity and richness of the characters' spiritual world. Typical examples of this are the "Jie song" (Ode to the orange) and the "Leidian song" (Ode to thunder and lightning) in *Qu Yuan*, the "Jingke ci qin" (Jingke the assassin of Emperor Qin) and the "Yishui ge" (Song of yishui) in *Gao Jianli*, the speech of Lord Xinling in persuading the King of the Wei to provide military aid to the Zhao in *Hu Fu*, and the confession of the Nie sister

⁶⁸⁷ Guo Moruo, "Xu ewen yiben shiju *Qu Yuan*" (Preface to the Russian translation of the history play *Qu Yuan*), in *Guo Moruo lun chuanguo* (Guo Moruo on literary creation), ed. Zhang Chenghuan (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1983), 404.

⁶⁸⁸ Eberstein, *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature*, 119.

before committing suicide after her brother's sacrifice for the country in *Tangdi zhihua*.

In addition, Guo's characterisation also indicated his romantic inclinations: those protagonists are greatly idealised as deified heroes deprived of any human desires; their lofty ideals and spirit of sacrifice, according to Guo, "signif[ies] the goodness of morality and justice" that are embodied in their "poetic soul[s]".⁶⁸⁹ Guo even invented some characters, or adapted certain historical events to better express his ideas. For example, the female character Chan Juan in *Qu Yuan* is "entirely imaginative" to serve the purpose of portraying "the only supporting power to comfort Qu Yuan and [keep] him fighting till the end of his life";⁶⁹⁰ the "calumniation" of Emperor Qin Shi Huang in *Gao Jianli*, on the other hand, is "deliberately designed as an oblique reference to the leader of the Nationalist Party Jiang Jieshi".⁶⁹¹

This obvious engagement of a romantic approach was consistent with Guo Moruo's history plays written in the 1920s, when he described his perception of dramaturgy as an attempt to "seek an internal unity" (*neibu de yizhi*) between "the mentalities of the ancients as I perceived" and "the profound empathy inside my heart".⁶⁹² To Guo, it was more important to focus on the personal interpretation than on the faithful presentation of history events in writing history plays: "my major concern is not to tell what people were like at a certain historical period, but to

⁶⁸⁹ Guo Moruo, "*Qu Yuan yu Liya wang*" (Qu Yuan and King Lear), first published in *Xinhua ribao* (Chongqing) (Xinhua daily, Chongqing), April 3, 1942, reprinted in *Zhongguo xin wenyi daxi: 1937-1949, pinglun ji* (Compendium of modern Chinese literature and art: 1937-1949, collection of critical essays), ed. Lin Zhihao (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 1998), 718-720.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁹¹ Guo Moruo, "*Gao Jianli fulu, jiao houji zhier*" (Appendix to *Gao Jianli*, postscript to the proofread, Part 2), reprinted in *Guo Moruo lun chuanguo* (Guo Moruo on literary creation), ed. Zhang Chenghuan (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1983), 443.

⁶⁹² Guo Moruo, "*Guzhu jun zhi erzi – muqian xuhua*" (The two princes of Guzhu – Preface), first published in *Chuangzao jikan* (Creation quarterly) 1, no. 4 (1923), reprinted in *Guo Moruo quanji, wenxue bian, di yi juan* (Complete works of Guo Moruo, literature, vol. 1) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1982), 238.

imagine what kind of reasonable development such people would receive.”⁶⁹³

Accordingly, Guo developed this perception into a principle called *shishi qiusi* (literally, sacrifice the history for the commonality), which meant to seek similarities of “the spirit of history” across different historical periods without necessarily following exactly the developing trace of a single historical event.⁶⁹⁴ He further differentiated between the writing of history plays and the writing of history: “Writing dramatic script is not the same as studying archaeology or history – what I do is just to present a time or a theme through certain historical scenes; this presentation can by all means be different from the original appearance of history.”⁶⁹⁵ In this regard, Guo proposed a “freedom of creativity” for the playwrights to “exaggerate” a little bit in “editing and arranging their materials”⁶⁹⁶: “they can either reverse or reinterpret certain historical events with new explanations, in order to concretely translate the true ancient spirit into the modern times.”⁶⁹⁷ He referred to *Kongque dan* and *Qu Yuan* as typical examples of this principle, which were “not entirely based on historical facts but more on our sympathy with some historical figures and interest in certain historical events”.⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁹³ Guo Moruo, “Xiangfei xianshi de pantao – wei *Hufu* yanchu er xie” (Peach of immortality to the reality – Writing for the performance of *Hufu*), first published in *Feigeng ji* (Collection of boiling soup) (Shanghai: Shanghai daxue chubanshe, 1947), reprinted in *Guo Moruo yanjiu ziliao, shang* (Research materials on Guo Moruo, Part 1), eds. Wang Xunzhao, Lu Zhengyan, and Shao Hua (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 287.

⁶⁹⁴ Guo Moruo, “Lishi Shiju Xianshi” (History – History play – Reality), first published in *Xiju yuebao* (Drama monthly) 1, no. 4 (1943), reprinted in *Guo Moruo lun chuanguo* (Guo Moruo on literary creation), ed. Zhang Chenghuan (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1983), 501.

⁶⁹⁵ Guo Moruo, “*Kongque dan* er san shi” (Several anecdotes of The peacock gall), in *Guo Moruo lun chuanguo* (Guo Moruo on literary creation), ed. Zhang Chenghuan (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1983), 456.

⁶⁹⁶ Guo Moruo, “Kangzhan banian de lishi ju” (History plays in the eight-year war of resistance), first published in *Xinhua ribao* (Chongqing) (Xinhua daily, Chongqing), May 22, 1946, reprinted in *Guo Moruo yanjiu ziliao, shang* (Research materials on Guo Moruo, Part 1), eds. Wang Xunzhao, Lu Zhengyan, and Shao Hua (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 301.

⁶⁹⁷ Guo Moruo, “Wo shi zenyang xie *Tangdi zhihua*” (How I wrote Wild cherry blossoms), in *Guo Moruo lun chuanguo* (Guo Moruo on literary creation), ed. Zhang Chenghuan (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1983), 368.

⁶⁹⁸ Guo, “Tan lishi ju” (On history plays), 507.

The literary reviews on Guo Moruo's works of the 1940s saw the same trend of a merging of the realist and romantic perspectives. On the one hand, contemporary critics emphasised the implication of realism in that the past was used to mirror and to inspire the present. Liu Tao saw a parallel between the Warring States period and wartime China of the 1940s, regarding both of them as "tragedies of the awakened" living at a time that "treats people inhumanly".⁶⁹⁹ This opinion echoed Guo's own words in referring to the Warring States period as "entirely a tragic age" when "our ancestors made great efforts to break away from the bondage of slavery but only ended in another enslavement"; therefore, tragedy came as "people were striving for their right to survival", reflecting the current circumstance of the Chinese struggling for independence and the coming of a new era in which they could be treated as humans.⁷⁰⁰ Liu Juran held that the portrayal of Qu Yuan's "patriotic sacrifice for the nation and an outstanding personality of perseverance" provided "a valuable lesson and model for the Chinese people, who are fighting in the war of resistance for national salvation".⁷⁰¹ Jian Bozan⁷⁰² perceived in *Kongque dan* the playwright's "advocacy of national unity" as well as his "critique on racist autocracy",⁷⁰³ which was indicative of the split situation in wartime China after the breakup of the Nationalist-Communist alliance against the Japanese invasion. This perspective of

⁶⁹⁹ Liu Tao, "Hufu zhong de dianxin he zhuti" (The prototype and theme in The tiger tally), first published in *Zhongyuan* (Central plain) 1 (1943), reprinted in *Guo Moruo yanjiu ziliao, zhong* (Research materials on Guo Moruo, Part 2), eds. Wang Xunzhao, Lu Zhengyan, and Shao Hua (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 788.

⁷⁰⁰ Guo, "Xiangxi xianshi de pantao" (Peach of immortality to the reality), 286-287.

⁷⁰¹ Liu Juran, "Ping Qu Yuan de juzuo yu yanchu" (On the writing and performance of Qu Yuan), first published in *Zhongyang ribao, di si ban* (Central daily, 4th edition), May 17, 1942, reprinted in *Guo Moruo yanjiu ziliao, zhong* (Research materials on Guo Moruo, Part 2), eds. Wang Xunzhao, Lu Zhengyan, and Shao Hua (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 746.

⁷⁰² Jian Bozan (1898-1968), historian, social activist, expert in Marxist history studies and its application in the analysis of Chinese socio-political issues.

⁷⁰³ Jian Bozan, "Guanyu Kongque dan" (On The peacock gall), first published in *Xinhua ribao, di si ban* (Xinhua daily, 4th edition), December 31, 1942, reprinted in *Guo Moruo yanjiu ziliao, zhong* (Research materials on Guo Moruo, Part 2), eds. Wang Xunzhao, Lu Zhengyan, and Shao Hua (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 795.

literary realism in general decoded Guo's plays according to the need of the present times, regarding the lofty spirit and morality he promoted through the retelling of history exactly what he felt the current society was in need of.

On the other hand, contemporary critics also valued the romantic features of Guo Moruo's plays. They observed an obvious idealisation of both characters and themes: for example, the striking contrast in characterisation between good and evil intentionally conveyed the playwright's moral ideals⁷⁰⁴ of "promoting the goodness of the ancient people to encourage the same in modern people while presenting the ugliness of the past to make the present alert";⁷⁰⁵ also, some invented characters embodied the playwright's political beliefs⁷⁰⁶ in national unity and anti-aggression.⁷⁰⁷ Jian Bozan associated the positive, uplifting tone created by this idealisation with tragedy's dramatic function of emotional release, holding that "the playwright pushes the sense of tragedy to its highly intensive extreme but offers the audience in the end the hope for a 'purified world' [*ganjing shijie*] in the future, so that the audience are consoled under the sun after being shocked in the thunderstorm."⁷⁰⁸

⁷⁰⁴ Liu Tao, "Tan *Qu Yuan* beizhuang ju" (On the tragedy *Qu Yuan*), first published in *Wenyi shenghuo* (Life of literature and arts) 3, no. 5 (1943), reprinted in *Guo Moruo yanjiu ziliao, zhong* (Research materials on Guo Moruo, Part 2), eds. Wang Xunzhao, Lu Zhengyan, and Shao Hua (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 756-759.

⁷⁰⁵ Guo, "Tan lishi ju" (On history plays), 506-507.

⁷⁰⁶ Zhang Ying, "Cong *Tangdi zhihua* tandao ping lishi ju" (On the assessment of history play from *Wild cherry blossoms*), first published in *Xinhua ribao* (Xinhua daily), December 7, 1941, reprinted in *Guo Moruo yanjiu ziliao, zhong* (Research materials on Guo Moruo, Part 2), eds. Wang Xunzhao, Lu Zhengyan, and Shao Hua (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 771; Zhe Shuchu, "*Hufu*" (The tiger tally), first published in *Wenyi xianfeng* (Pioneer of literature and arts) 1, no. 4 (1942), reprinted in *Guo Moruo yanjiu ziliao, zhong* (Research materials on Guo Moruo, Part 2), eds. Wang Xunzhao, Lu Zhengyan, and Shao Hua (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 782.

⁷⁰⁷ Li Changzhi, "*Tangdi zhihua*" (*Wild cherry blossoms*), first published in *Wenyi xianfeng* (Pioneer of literature and arts) 1, no. 4 (1942), reprinted in *Guo Moruo yanjiu ziliao, zhong* (Research materials on Guo Moruo, Part 2), eds. Wang Xunzhao, Lu Zhengyan, and Shao Hua (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 774-775.

⁷⁰⁸ Jian, "*Guanyu Kongque dan*" (On The peacock gall), 794.

Li Changzhi,⁷⁰⁹ in particular, thought highly of the romantic style of involving strong emotions with the tragic narrative; he regarded this technique as “the genuine literary creativity”, because it aimed “not only at exposing the darkness but more importantly at creating light” for the future. In this sense, Li proposed “a great transformation in the field of modern Chinese literature and arts”, in which “we will soon see the creative inspiration being released from the shallow, superficial rationality of realism into the passions of idealism.”⁷¹⁰ Zhang Ying⁷¹¹ went further to term this romantic tendency as “revolutionary romanticism”, which was “by no means an artistic defect but an integral part of the revolutionary realism that helped the realist trend to reach its climax in today’s revolution.”⁷¹² This statement properly summarised the convergence of the realist and the romantic perspectives in the literary reviews of Guo’s history plays of the 1940s, when, instead of being rejected as in the 1930s, the romantic features were somewhat interpreted according to a practical need of the revolution.⁷¹³

⁷⁰⁹ Li Changzhi (1910-1978), writer, literary critic and historian, expert in the study of classical Chinese literature.

⁷¹⁰ Li, “*Tangdi zhihua*” (Wild cherry blossoms), 774-775.

⁷¹¹ The secretary of Zhou Enlai (one of the top leaders of the Communist Party; later the Premier of the People’s Republic of China) at the time.

⁷¹² Zhang, “*Cong Tangdi zhihua tandao ping lishi ju*” (On the assessment of history play from Wild cherry blossoms), 771-772.

The terms of “revolutionary romanticism” and “revolutionary realism” (or “socialist realism”) are instituted in Marxist literary criticism. Maxim Gorky first promoted these concepts in his speech at the Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934, following the debate on the appropriate literary and artistic methods applied in Soviet literature. See Maxim Gorky et al, *Soviet Writers’ Congress, 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), 44; see also analysis in M. Keith Booker, ed., *Encyclopedia of Literature and Politics: S-Z* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005), 665-674.

The modern Chinese appropriation of these concepts started from the late 1920s, when the fever of the May Fourth Movement was gradually fading and brought about a controversy among intellectuals over the assessment of Romanticism. See, for instance, Jiang Guangci, “Shiyue Geming yu Eluosi wenxue” (The October Revolution and Russian literature), *Chuangzao yuekan* (Creation monthly) 1 (1926): 105-113.

⁷¹³ In fact, this incorporation of romanticism into realism was a popular trend in literary criticism of the 1940s. This was largely due to the upgrading of the status of romanticism in modern Chinese literature, when the outbreak of war provided great demand among both the writers and the audience for a direct and strong emotional expression. Intellectuals at this time called for the convergence between the rational depiction of reality and the

Later scholars in general associate the merging of the features of realism and romanticism in Guo Moruo's wartime history plays with the changeover in his conception of literary creativity. As a leading member of The Creation Society, Guo's literary orientation in the early 1920s is chiefly romantic. Later research on his writing activities at this time on the one hand focus on his previous practice with poetry and poetic drama which involves lush lyricism;⁷¹⁴ on the other hand highlight the obvious influence from such romanticists as Wordsworth, Whitman, Goethe, and Shelley on the formation of his perception of the independence of arts and the non-utilitarian purpose of literary creativity.⁷¹⁵ However, Guo converted to realism in the late 1920s after familiarising himself with Marxist literary criticism, considering realism to be "the newest and the most advanced" in its "thorough

unrestrained overflow of feelings, in order to encourage the people with passion for revolution. See relevant articles produced during this period: Mu Mutian, "Muqian xinshi yundong de zhankai wenti" (On the current matter of the development of the New Poetry Movement), in *Mu Mutian shiwen ji* (The collection of poetry and essays of Mu Mutian) (Changchun: Shidai wenyi chubanshe, 1985), 350-360; Jie Ru, "Lun minzu geming de xianshi zhuyi" (On the realism of nationalist revolution), *Wenyi zhendi* (Literary battle formation) 3, no. 8 (1939): 1054-1056; and Lin Huanping, "Kangri de xianshi zhuyi yu geming de langman zhuyi" (The anti-Japanese realism and the revolutionary romanticism), *Wenxue yuebao* (Literature monthly) 2, nos. 1-2 (1940): 24-27.

⁷¹⁴ See, for instance, Qiu Wenzhi, "Lun Guo Moruo lishi ju de langman zhuyi shiqing" (On the poetic lyricism of Guo Moruo's history plays), *Guo Moruo yanjiu: xueshu zuotanhui zhuanji* (Guo Moruo studies: Collection of essays from the academic forum, 1984), 90-91; Tian Benxiang, and Yang Jinghui, *Guo Moruo shiju lun* (On Guo Moruo's history play) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1985), 8-15; and Fu Zhengqian, "Guanyu lishi ju de chuangzuo fangfa wenti – Guo Moruo shiju lilun yanjiu" (On the methods of writing history plays – The study of Guo Moruo's theory of history plays), *Shanxi shifan daxue xuebao, zhexue shehui kexue ban* (Journal of Shanxi Normal University, philosophy and social sciences) 3 (1986): 33-34.

⁷¹⁵ In regard to this literary inclination, Guo admitted his indebtedness to such Western inspirations as the ancient Greek tragedians, Shakespeare, and Goethe, (See, Guo, "Wo shi zenyang xie *Tangdi zhihua*" (How I wrote Wild cherry blossoms), 368; and Guo Moruo, "Wode xuesheng shidai" (My student years), first published in *Funü xinyun* (New movement of women) 5 (1942), reprinted in *Moruo wenji, di qi juan* (Essay collection of Moruo, vol. 7) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1959), 68.) while later scholars attribute this romantic feature to the influence from Goethe and Schiller. (See detailed analysis in Wang Furen, and Luo Gang, "Guo Moruo zaoqi de meixue guan he xifang langman zhuyi meixue" (The early phase of Guo Moruo's aesthetic conception and Western romantic aesthetics), *Zhongguo shehui kexue* (Social sciences in China) 3 (1984): 174-181; Tian, *Zhongguo xiandai bijiao xiju shi* (History of modern Chinese comparative drama), 625; and Chen, "Guo Moruo de lishi beiju suoshou Gede yu Xile de yingxiang" (The influence of Goethe and Schiller on Guo Moruo's history tragedy), 325-330.)

sympathy with the proletariat”.⁷¹⁶ The socio-political circumstances of the 1940s enhanced his pursuit of realism, as modern Chinese intellectuals in the main saw literary practice as a revolutionary weapon during wartime, thus “voluntarily gave up their individual visions in their patriotic zeal to serve their country”.⁷¹⁷ As a result, the engagement with realism during this period indicated Guo’s abandonment of the non-utilitarian tenet for a zealous attempt to “solve the possible contradiction [between art and politics]” by “linking literature with revolution”.⁷¹⁸

To later scholars, the historical materialist perspective from Marxism influenced Guo’s notion of tragedy, in that “he devoted himself to exploring the root of tragedy in the confrontation between the irresistible tide of history and the temporarily unrealised goal in social advancement”;⁷¹⁹ on the other hand, this Marxism perspective also determined the tone of Guo’s tragic narrative, which was “not at all hopeless, pessimistic, or gloomy” but instead brimmed with a spirit of “rebellion and resistance” that “encouraged the audience with great power”.⁷²⁰ The latter feature carried an impact from Maxim Gorky’s conception of “active romanticism”, which “endeavours to strengthen the will to live in people, calling up their thoughts of resistance with regard to reality and all that oppresses in reality”.⁷²¹ Therefore, Guo Moruo’s tragic narrative was another example of the uplifting, optimistic expression of *the tragic* existed in Chinese literary context of the 1940s.⁷²²

⁷¹⁶ Guo Moruo, “Geming yu wenxue” (Revolution and literature), first published in *Wenyi lunji xuji* (Sequel to the collection of critical essays on literature and arts) (Shanghai: Guanghai shuju, 1931), reprinted in *Guo Moruo lun chuangzuo* (Guo Moruo on literary creation), ed. Zhang Chenghuan (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1983), 35-37.

⁷¹⁷ Lee, “Road to Revolution,” 474.

⁷¹⁸ Lee, *Romantic Generation*, 196.

⁷¹⁹ Tian, *Zhongguo xiandai bijiao xiju shi* (History of modern Chinese comparative drama), 628.

⁷²⁰ Wang Houjin, *Guo Moruo shiju lun* (On Guo Moruo’s history play) (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1988), 246.

⁷²¹ Maxim Gorky, “How I Learned to Write,” in *On Literature: Selected Articles* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960), 32-33.

⁷²² See details in Kuang Xinnian, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue lilun piping gainian* (The conception of modern Chinese literary theories and criticism) (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 2014), 250-252; and Sun Yushuang,

As a result, the shift of literary orientation of Guo Moruo from romanticism to realism produced changes to his writing purpose, as “his artistic concern about his works turned from an emphasis on their aesthetic qualities to the expression of the spirit of the times as well as the social effects they produced”.⁷²³ Guo’s practical experiences with both tendencies helped him to develop a distinctive literary style, which was to convey his literary realist thematic concern through a romantic way of expression that “combined the social significance and political awareness of the history play with distinctive subjectivity and lyricism”.⁷²⁴ In this regard, although remaining a controversial figure for his constant conversion to almost all the new trends in modern Chinese literature, Guo Moruo still processes a representative significance for his practice with different tragic narratives across different times, which is indicative of the development of the modern Chinese perception of tragedy.

In conclusion, the tragic narratives in the 1940s are first of all marked with features of pragmatism and functionalism: both the faithful depiction of common people’s miserable life and the advocacy of the fighting spirit aim at solving certain practical problems prevailing in wartime China. As a result, realism predominates the writing of some popular history plays at this time. It is noticeable that even the involvement with lyricism and subjectivity in those works allows certain space for romantic conventions, the attempt to retell the past in alluding to the present can be itself earthly and utilitarian: because in achieving this goal, history has to be rewritten in a purposive way to convey certain practical messages that are capable of producing profound and instant social effects to the present times. The contemporary literary criticism reveals the same trend, as has been shown above: a majority of

“Guo Moruo beiju guan yu Zhongwai beiju lilun” (Guo Moruo’s conception of tragedy and the Chinese-foreign theories of tragedy), *Guo Moruo xuekan* (Journal of Guo Moruo studies) 3 (1994): 54-55.

⁷²³ Song Baozhen, *Canque de chibang – Zhongguo xiandai xiju lilun piping shigao* (Fragmented wings – History of modern Chinese dramatic criticism) (Beijing: Beijing guangbo xueyuan chubanshe, 2002), 337.

⁷²⁴ Qian, Wen, and Wu, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshi nian* (Three decades in modern Chinese literature), 113.

reviews concentrate on the social implications rather than on the artistic or aesthetic qualities of the works. Therefore, the romantic aesthetic attempt may only exist by voluntarily incorporating into the pragmatic objective of realism. This trend has thus produced a convergence of realism and romanticism in both literary creativity and criticism, which serves as a third approach for the modern Chinese appropriation of *the tragic*.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how the concept of tragedy has been introduced and has negotiated itself into modern Chinese literary discourse during a time period of thirty-two years from 1917 to 1949. Diachronically, the characteristics of this development process can be summarised as follows:

In theoretical discussions, the perception of the concept of tragedy has been gradually deepened: it evolves from a relatively superficial understanding in the 1920s, to an overall assimilation of foreign theories and terms in the 1930s, and then to a rather new interpretation distinctively associated with the unique Chinese socio-political circumstances in the 1940s.

The modern Chinese discourse on tragedy was in the first place formulated on the basis of a complete negation of the existing Chinese literary traditions. One typical example was the intellectual critique on the *Datanyuan* ending pattern, which was directly connected to the so-called backwardness of Chinese literature and cultural mentality. As a result, the original Chinese perception of tragedy was first of all a matter of counter-*Datanyuan*, hence its relation with the truthfulness of literature being constantly examined in a socio-cultural dimension.

This trend changed in the 1930s. Scholars no longer regarded the concept of tragedy as solely an ideological weapon; instead, they introduced and discussed extensively the foreign theories and terms of tragedy – especially Aristotle's definitions. The notion of "tragic conflict" became a keyword for scholarly research at this time; intellectuals in the main held that tragedy was produced by confronting forces, and accordingly classified different types of tragedy.

But the war interrupted the theoretical construction in the late 1930s. The diversity of interpretations of tragic conflict was much homogenised into a single presentation of the rivalry between the collective struggle and the external threat, connecting the perception of tragedy with the spirit of resistance. This association

endowed the tragic notion with an overt inspiring sense serving the needs of wartime mobilisation, which differed from the previous perceptions that emphasised mainly a miserable and melancholy mood in the emotional effects offered by tragedy. This new interpretation signified the integration of an imported literary concept into the indigenous socio-cultural experience, distinguishing the modern Chinese perception of tragedy from that of its European origins.

Accordingly, in literary creativity, a similar trend was observable: the literary practice with *the tragic* developed from primarily a somewhat indiscriminate portrayal of commonplace miseries in the 1920s, to an intense focus upon the overwhelming external forces destroying the struggling mankind in the 1930s, and finally to the presentation of heroic deeds against evil forces with the great passion of patriotism in the 1940s.

Generally speaking, the literary expression of *the tragic* was more or less an instant reflection of the contemporary theoretical discussions at each stage of modern Chinese literature: the counter-*Datanyuan* tendency produced a series of works with deliberately designed unhappy endings; the introduction of the ancient Greek tragic ideas and plays inspired the works of Cao Yu and Mao Dun; and the concern over such grand themes as national salvation and the upholding of justice found full expression in the wartime history plays. Consequently, the emotional tone of the tragic literature also went through a shift from a mere sadness in the social problem plays, to a feeling of powerlessness before the destined destruction in *Leiyu*, *Ziye* and *Luotuo Xiangzi*, and then to a revolutionary optimism conveyed through *Qu Yuan* and *Hufu*. This change, according to later scholars, is in line with the historical trends of modern China in the first half of the 20th century, which consisted of two inextricably linked concerns: one is the criticism and negation of the old world, the other is the praise and longing for the new world.⁷²⁵ As a result, the thematic shift of tragic literature from the accusation of social realities to the advocacy of the

⁷²⁵ Huang, and Tong, *Zhongxi bijiao shixue tixi* (The comparative poetics between China and the West), 738-739.

protagonists' revolutionary ideals and spirit of sacrifice served exactly as a literary response to this transition.

The major influence from foreign intellectual tradition on modern Chinese perception of tragedy takes the shape of two pairs of different perspectives, namely, literary utilitarianism and literary aestheticism in theoretical discussions, corresponding to realism and romanticism in literary creativity. These two pairs of perspectives set the tone for the Chinese interpretation of the concept of tragedy: literary utilitarianism and literary aestheticism focus respectively on the foremost importance of tragedy's practical utility in social progression, or of tragedy's aesthetic function to offer emotional cleansing to the audience; realism and romanticism debate the intricate relation between literature and social reality that besieged several generations of writers throughout the Republican era. It is noticeable that these viewpoints have not developed in a balanced way, as a pragmatic realist concern has prevailed in both theory and practice during the entire modern period of Chinese literature. Compared with formulating a definition of tragedy, modern Chinese scholars were more interested in exploring the function of tragedy; in other words, they asked more of "what is the use of tragedy" than "what is tragedy" in their vigorous attempts to construct a modern critical discourse on tragedy.

This inclination parallels the lingering intentions of modern Chinese writers, whose socio-political complex has always been significant in shaping their literary tastes and orientations. As a result, their aesthetic pursuit was usually overpowered and incorporated into the ubiquitous political concern, because the wide acceptance of the term "tragedy" in the modern Chinese literary context was first of all carried out in the domain of enlightenment, not the aesthetics. A brief survey of the scholarly research at this time proves this assertion: there was a comparatively less systematic study of the aesthetic features of tragedy, because modern Chinese tragic perception "had no intention of seeking the essence of the aesthetic with philosophical

significance”, but instead placed “unprecedented emphasis on criticising the reality and intervening life.”⁷²⁶ This motivation explained a common trend in the aesthetic field, where the scholarly exploration and advocacy of the aesthetic characteristics of tragedy often ended up with the discussions of the practical effects tragedy provided to benefit the society. The inextricable pragmatic concern penetrating the aesthetic reading of tragedy thus becomes one of the distinctive elements of the modern Chinese tragic notion.

To summarise, the modern Chinese literary discourse on tragedy has the following major features:

First, the theoretical discussions of the concept of tragedy at both the dramatic and aesthetic levels keep largely in tune with the literary expression of certain themes echoing the spirit of the times; that is to say, for the construction of a modern tragic tradition in Chinese literature, the discourse on a particular genre has not generated many significant differences from the discourse on literature as a whole during the same period.

Second, the shifting focus from enlightenment to national salvation, and the gradually deepening politicisation of literature has made the Chinese notion of tragedy a hybrid of foreign influences; therefore, the boundary between realism and romanticism in both the creation and review of tragic works is constantly blurred, while any pursuit of romanticism has eventually been interpreted from and included in the perspective of realism.

Third, the critical tradition of tragedy has not developed systematically in the Republican period: for one thing, the theoretical discussions remain in general a simple repeat and paraphrase of foreign theories, while the application of such theories to the analysis of Chinese works is usually inactive or inconspicuous; for another, the academic trend has not been strong enough to form a group of professional literary critics solely engaged in the theoretical studies of tragedy. For

⁷²⁶ Yin Hong, *Beiju yishi yu beiju yishu* (Tragic consciousness and the art of tragedy) (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 1992), 139.

most of the time, those scholars who introduced and discussed the concept of tragedy were not themselves literary theorists: some were social activists applying the concept of tragedy to their political purpose; some were writers reflecting on their own experience of literary practice of *the tragic* – the former intensified the ideological instrumentalisation of tragedy, and the latter was more or less empirical thus lacking the theoretical foundation which offered guidance as to how to grasp the disciplines of literary creativity. Tian Benxiang refers to this critical tradition as a “non-academic dramatic criticism”,⁷²⁷ which makes modern Chinese tragic perception distinctly transplanting, imitating, and functionalising.⁷²⁸ As a result, the academic research and construction of the concept of tragedy has not become a common practice for modern Chinese scholarship; rather, the development and popularisation of tragedy both as a literary notion and genre has to a great extent been reliant upon the cultural, social, and political campaigns.

The introduction of the term “tragedy” into the modern Chinese literary context is mandated by a largely indiscriminate obsession with Euro-American inspirations from across different literary traditions or phases, regardless of whether they are “in the Western context perceived to be largely at odds with each other”.⁷²⁹ This desire explains the coexistence of foreign influences within the same period of modern Chinese literature, such as the Aristotelian definition of tragedy, the Shakespearean expression of tragic conflicts, and the modern tragic notion of Henrik Ibsen. However, the specific Chinese adaptations of these tragic themes differ from their origins in the following aspects:

First, in regard to the presentation of the irresistible forces that bring mankind to their spiritual or physical destruction, modern Chinese tragic literature concentrates on revealing certain earthly matters resulting from either the social transformation or

⁷²⁷ Tian Benxiang, “Xuyan” (Preface), in *Canque de chibang – Zhongguo xiandai xiju lilun piping shigao* (Fragmented wings – History of modern Chinese dramatic criticism), ed. Song Baozhen (Beijing: Beijing guangbo xueyuan chubanshe, 2002), 4.

⁷²⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁷²⁹ Denton, *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, 33.

from the foreign military threat. This viewpoint is different from the major ancient Greek tragedies, which usually emphasise the ultimate existence of an omnipotent power beyond human control.

Modern Chinese writers consider the presentation of the commonplace incidents of the ordinary people the foremost concern of tragedy. Accordingly, they connect tragedy with reality, rather than with certain mysterious, unpredictable forces such as fate or destiny which carry certain transcendental senses that distance tragedy from the audience's daily life experience. This theme is conveyed through Ba Jin's *Jia*, and Guo Moruo's *Qu Yuan*, in which the miserable destruction of the tragic figure is mainly due to their lack of resistance to external forces or to their temporary weakness in power, not to the undefiable manipulation of fate. (Cao Yu's *Leiyu* carries the most obvious inherited features from the ancient Greek notion of fate, but has received sharp criticism from the contemporary intelligentsia; this is an example of the rejection from modern Chinese literature toward the Greek notion of fate.) Therefore, tragedy in the modern Chinese literary context is in the first place not an aesthetic approach providing the audience with pity and fear to purify their minds and souls, but a tool that transfers the sympathetic feelings of grief and indignation into the practical concern over the current socio-political affairs, and also into instant action to make a change.

Second, in regard to the presentation of the causal factors of tragedy, modern Chinese tragic literature focuses on the external elements that interrupt and destroy the protagonists' normal life. This viewpoint is different from that of Shakespearean tragedies, which usually explore the protagonists' inward world for the defects of human nature that prevent them from achieving their goals.

A brief look at those tragic works discussed in the above chapters shows that there is a central theme running through modern Chinese tragic narratives: to present the collective experience of the common people from different social stratum at an age of transition and great upheavals, where overpowering external forces play a

crucial role in determining people's existential experience. Examples are Mao Dun's *Ziye*, and Lao She's *Luotuo Xiangzi*, in which the external factors serve both to trigger the tragic conflicts and to motivate the plot development. Consequently, it is not the protagonists but the external environment that should be blamed for making such tragedies. This theme indicates opinion to see tragedy as originating from the society and thus mirroring the society, which is popular among a majority of modern Chinese intellectuals.

Third, in regard to the portrayal of some lingering problems confronting human beings in modern times, modern Chinese tragic literature is initially "preoccupied with down-to-earth worries over"⁷³⁰ the practical issues besieging the society in transition. This viewpoint is different from Henrik Ibsen's tragedies, which, apart from revealing certain problems among different social classes, reflect more on the spiritual matters concerning the existential anxieties of the modern people.

Such a focus determines the key features of modern Chinese tragic literature as basically physical, secular, and optimistic, highlighting the functional role of a literary concept that leads people to "the practical struggles against a changeable tragic reality".⁷³¹ In this respect, the short stories of Lu Xun and Yu Dafu written in the 1920s serve as examples in that, although dealing with similar problems such as individual ideals disillusioned by reality, or spiritual exile due to grave mental depression, they have in essence been obsessed with the prevailing social affairs. This practical concern is "sure to weaken the desolation originating from the spiritual wasteland of an isolated individual", hence reducing such abstract senses from modern Chinese tragic perception.⁷³² To later scholars, this understanding of tragic realism tightens the relationship between the writers and the social environment they

⁷³⁰ Cheng, "The Impact of Japanese Literary Trends on Modern Chinese Writers," 76.

⁷³¹ Yin, *Beiju yishi yu beiju yishu* (Tragic consciousness and the art of tragedy), 143.

⁷³² Gao, *Bijiao wenxue yu ershi shiji Zhongguo wenxue* (Comparative Literature and the 20th Century Chinese Literature), 203.

live in; it is “in complete contrast to”⁷³³ European realism, which usually offers the writers either a dissociated status “with no social ties”,⁷³⁴ or an “aesthetic withdrawal”⁷³⁵ from current political movements.

These differences discussed above provide the modern Chinese notion of tragedy with a contested nature. Scholarly scrutiny usually debates over the issue of literary quality, holding that the apparent pragmatic perspective has “eclipsed” the artistic value of many of the modern Chinese tragic works with “the sometimes more than clearly pronounced political or social message”.⁷³⁶ Criticism of this feature is well aware of the intrinsic utilitarianism permeating the modern Chinese introduction of the concept of tragedy, pointing out a hidden problem facing the pragmatic objective running through the entire period of modern Chinese literature: on the one hand, the tasks of enlightenment and national salvation assigned to tragedy seems a necessity produced by the pressing historical and social imperatives; but on the other hand, the intensive focus on cultural and social revolution may reduce the literariness of those tragic works, which are not concerned primarily with the aesthetic needs but rather to cater for “the larger social and cultural benefits literary innovation seemed to promise”.⁷³⁷ This problem is most explicit in some of the 1920s social problem plays/fictions, when the genuineness of *the tragic* is constantly questioned by both contemporary and later scholars. It remains essential for tragedies written in the following decades, as the deepening social and political tensions have pushed drama to the forefront of “ideological feuds, political purges, and mass campaigns”⁷³⁸ due

⁷³³ McDougall, *Introduction of Western Literary Theories*, 258.

⁷³⁴ Jaroslav Průšek, “A Few Notes on the Literary Aspects of the May Fourth Movement in China,” in *The May Fourth Movement in China: Major Papers Prepared for the XXth International Congress of Chinese Studies* (Prague: Orientální ústav, 1968), 144-146.

⁷³⁵ Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 25.

⁷³⁶ Eberstein, *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature*, 8-9.

⁷³⁷ Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 25.

⁷³⁸ Constantine Tung, “Tradition and Experience of the Drama of the People’s Republic of China,” in *Drama in the People’s Republic of China*, eds. Constantine Tung, and Colin Mackerras (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 1.

to its emotional “appeal and propaganda value”.⁷³⁹

Later scholarship explores the reasons from two main aspects: First, the modern Chinese tragic perception inherits from traditional Chinese culture and morality “the greater emphasis on the group rather than the individual”.⁷⁴⁰ This viewpoint serves not only as “a source of great social strength and stability”, but also the natural barrier “against a tragic view of life”, because the advocacy of the social tie and contribution as the individual standard of conduct has quickly caused “the possibility of tragedy” to recede.⁷⁴¹ This literary orientation would therefore nourish a tragic literature that “deal[s] with actual life experience without the artificial mediation of literary or cultural conventions”.⁷⁴²

Second, the application of theories into practices has not been very effective in the modern Chinese construction of a tragic tradition. Scholars consider this development process fairly incomplete as certain “imported models do not function like their European counterparts”.⁷⁴³ It is noticeable that those who discuss the theories of tragedy and those who actually practise with the tragic narratives in literary creativity are almost entirely two different groups of people. Although a relative separation between theorists and writers is not uniquely Chinese, this phenomenon still hinders to a certain extent the acceptance and development of the concept of tragedy in modern Chinese literature. Taking the period of the 1930s as an example: the active import and discussion of Aristotle’s definitions “failed to stimulate much literary creativity”⁷⁴⁴ except for Cao Yu’s imitations which would be rather seen as a somewhat isolated case. It is much the same with the situations in the 1920s and 1940s, when the tragic narratives are based more often on the writers’

⁷³⁹ Yu, *Chinese Drama after the Cultural Revolution*, 2.

⁷⁴⁰ Paul S. Ropp, “The Distinctive Art of Chinese Fiction,” in *Chinese Aesthetics and Literature: A Reader*, ed. Corinne H. Dale (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 314.

⁷⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁷⁴² Lee, “Quest for Modernity,” 493-494.

⁷⁴³ Jسدانى Gregory, *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture: Inventing National Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xiii.

⁷⁴⁴ Goldman, and Lee, *An Intellectual History of Modern China*, 220.

personal experiences and likings rather than closely following the existing theories. In this sense, the modern Chinese literary practice with *the tragic* is constantly spontaneous or self-motivated, which would easily be influenced by or even incorporated into the prevailing literary trend of pragmatic realism, and hence is open to question for its lack of artistry.

However, in this study, it is not necessary to simply negate or downgrade the artistic value of modern Chinese tragic literature just because “it cannot culminate in a faithful duplication of Western prototypes”.⁷⁴⁵ Rather, the divergence between the tragic traditions of modern China and the West is in any case inevitable, because “Western and Chinese literary experiences in the twentieth century are fundamentally different”.⁷⁴⁶ This difference has not only been shaped by the unique socio-political circumstances in Republican China, but also originated in the traditional idea of Chinese literature, which “stressed the moral function of literature”⁷⁴⁷ as “sacred and inviolable” ever since “the establishment of the legitimate status of Confucianism in the Chinese ideological system in the 2nd century BC.”⁷⁴⁸ The traditional view sees literature as an approach and a tool to bring about changes to the existing social customs. Therefore, it is a common practice for the Chinese to place a particular emphasis on literature’s reflective function of the moral standards and the human nature; in other words, literature’s educational function is “a fundamental part of the great tradition”⁷⁴⁹ of Chinese literature.

This literary orientation explains the involvement of tragedy into the cultural ideological domain in modern Chinese intellectual discussions in the critique of the national character. It also fits in the slogan *wen yi zai dao* (literature to convey the

⁷⁴⁵ Gregory, *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture*, xiii.

⁷⁴⁶ Denton, *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, 59.

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁸ Liu Ruoyu, *Zhongguo de wenxue lilun* (Chinese literary theories) (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1988), 163.

⁷⁴⁹ Bonnie S. McDougall, “The Impact of Western Literary Trends,” in *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*, ed. Merle Goldman (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977), 40.

truth), in which “writing’s power to transform values”⁷⁵⁰ is regarded as inseparable from “the official and intellectual activities in the service of one’s country”.⁷⁵¹ As a result, modern Chinese writers have often voluntarily adopted the role of traditional Chinese men of letters “as reformer[s] or social critic[s]”,⁷⁵² whose “sense of mission impelled them to see themselves as social reformers and spokesmen for the national conscience”.⁷⁵³ This “conscious political orientation of a majority of the writers”⁷⁵⁴ determines their introduction of foreign literary concepts, where such terms as “tragedy” are “proposed to revive”⁷⁵⁵ and to “[revitalise] the ancient Chinese idea of literature’s important function”⁷⁵⁶ as “a reflection of society”.⁷⁵⁷ In this sense, the “continuity of the native tradition”⁷⁵⁸ from the aspects both of literature’s role and of writers’ responsibility has shaped the modern Chinese tragic perception, distinguishing it from its foreign counterparts.

Leo Ou-fan Lee refers to modern Chinese literary creativity as “[thriving] in the worst of times”: “the last decade of the Ch’ing, the chaotic period of warlordism, the years of impending war with Japan, and the eve of the final victory of the Communist Revolution”.⁷⁵⁹ This is also the period when the concept of tragedy has been introduced and has gradually negotiated into the modern Chinese literary context. During this process, the term “tragedy” acquires its usages and implications through constant reinvention or modification, and thus becomes “more a part of the problem”⁷⁶⁰ itself with regard to defining different meanings of tragedy in the

⁷⁵⁰ Denton, “Mao Zedong’s ‘Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature’,” 468.

⁷⁵¹ Cheng, “The Impact of Japanese Literary Trends,” 65.

⁷⁵² McDougall, “The Impact of Western Literary Trends,” 40.

⁷⁵³ Lee, *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers*, 37.

⁷⁵⁴ Eberstein, *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature*, 7.

⁷⁵⁵ McDougall, “The Impact of Western Literary Trends,” 40.

⁷⁵⁶ Cheng, “The Impact of Japanese Literary Trends,” 65.

⁷⁵⁷ McDougall, “The Impact of Western Literary Trends,” 40.

⁷⁵⁸ McDougall, *Introduction of Western Literary Theories*, 266.

⁷⁵⁹ Lee, “Road to Revolution,” 491.

⁷⁶⁰ Beaugrande, “Discourse Analysis and Literary Theory,” 439.

modern Chinese literary tradition. In this sense, the contested features discussed above are in other ways the intrinsic nature of the Chinese notion of tragedy, which have produced a series of problems and debates concerning the genuineness of a Chinese tragedy. However, “to understand a problem makes it a different sort of problem”: “[n]o longer is it one by which you are trapped, but one with which you can deal.”⁷⁶¹ Therefore, to investigate the changes which have taken place within the development of a literary notion, and to compare between the features of a particular genre and of the overall literary scene, may be a feasible way to approach and to progress further on this matter – this is exactly what this study has above all endeavoured to achieve.

⁷⁶¹ Kate Fowle, and Deborah Smith, eds., *Shelf Life* (London: Gasworks, 2001), 45.

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